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OF
DARKNESS

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THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS

THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS

By KENNETH LAING

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To
JANE ANNE

THE HOUSE OF DARKNESS

CHAPTER I

It was a wild winter evening, about mid-December, and the dusk had brought with it a suggestion of snow. The little wayside pools which pock-marked the surface of the dim Hampstead high-road wore a mask of ice, and frozen crystals clothed the bare trees in a mock foliage of bright diamond points.

Set back from the lane which runs up to the Spaniards Inn, and not far from the clump of tall trees known as Constable's Firs, stood a low, rather forbidding-looking house, which hid its face—almost fearfully, it seemed—behind a thick hedge of dark evergreens. It had remained apparently deserted for many years; and, although it was generally understood to be occupied, no one was ever seen to enter or leave except in the night, when the lamps were lit in the lane outside, throwing long shadows up the weed-grown drive.

Although there seemed to be a lack of tenancy, and there was a palpable need of attention, no disposal boards ever appeared,

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and, as the rent was duly paid, presumably the landlord was satisfied with the arrangement himself. The place had a sinister reputation, the origin of which was uncertain, although there was a story told, many years ago, of a storm-bound labourer who had entered it for shelter while crossing the Heath. The account related that the man found the bones of a skeleton chained to one of the hall-way chairs; but this was a legend, twenty years old now, and perhaps it has been overdrawn.

It was still quite early—barely five o'clock—when the hurrying figures of two men suddenly loomed out of the gathering darkness, and came to the gateway of the deserted house. They moved swiftly, silently, and, before they disappeared into the dim obscurity of the overshadowing tree-lined drive, they paused and glanced furtively about.

Nothing stirred, and there came no sound, save the dismal howling of the rising wind in the gloomy, stark-limbed trees above.

One of the men growled apprehensively to his companion, but then, binding his dark coat tighter about him, moved on, and approached the front of the house which showed dimly before them. No light appeared at any of the windows, nor, indeed,

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did they seem to expect any, for they walked quickly up to a side door and beat stealthily on its panels—two faint knocks, followed by another, after a pause; obviously a prearranged signal.

After an impatient wait of a few moments, a thin line of light showed under the lintel, and then silently the door swung back. No one emerged over the threshold to greet nor to repel them, but a deeply shaded lantern hung overhead just inside, and the opening beckoned.

They stepped in, and immediately the door closed. Still no one appeared, and yet the sensation of being closely watched was borne in unmistakably upon them.

The bare passage-way in which they now stood, dimly illuminated as it was, showed no opening on either side, but the far end, which escaped the feeble light of the lamp, lay undisclosed—dark and indeterminable before them.

One of the men stepped forward and motioned impatiently to the other.

“Come on, Neile,” he growled.

As they moved, the sound of their footsteps rang out on the carpetless floor, but the man who had been addressed as Neile, and had recently been looking fearfully about him,

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turned and followed closely on the heels of his companion.

They came to a thick curtain, and past this to a dark-tiled hall, and the leader, who was obviously aware of the lay-out of the house, then stepped up to a door opposite and unceremoniously flung it open. There came of a sudden a blaze of lights, a murmur of men's voices, and an unexpected vision which caused the other to step back a pace, with a startled exclamation.

The room into which he now looked was sumptuously furnished, and to one side crackled a cheerful fire. It was brilliantly illuminated by a ring of bright electric lamps, hung from the centre of the ceiling, and directly over the polished surface of a circular walnut table. But it was not the panelled walls which had amazed him, nor the Turkish carpet, nor even the general atmosphere of luxury which pervaded the whole apartment. It was rather the sight of the four men, assembled about the round table, the group which had swung their masked faces round to meet his scared one as he stood, even now, wavering on the threshold.

The man who had opened the door slouched in before him.

"Neile!" he announced in a harsh voice, dragging the other forward as he advanced.

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A tall, broad-shouldered young man, who was seated immediately facing them, rose, and drew a chair up to his side.

"Sit here," he ordered the newcomer, in a domineering voice. "You may go, Mac. We shall want the car at the usual time."

The man addressed nodded grimly, and for a moment a broad scar which disfigured the left side of his face flashed angrily in the light; then he swung quickly out, slamming the door with a crash behind him.

Neile was seated by now, and looked around at the others, twisting his tweed cap nervously between his fingers. A box of cigars was pushed across the table, and he looked up apprehensively at the individual who offered them. Sam Neile was no fool, and, incidentally, was an observant man, and he now noticed that, although the other wore the evening dress of a man about town, in common with the remainder, the hand which had appeared was red and coarse and the fingers were short and broad-tipped.

This man and his clothes were incongruous enough, but so perhaps was the contrast between the room and the other men it contained. Neile was no art critic, so he could not tell that the picture which faced him—one with an uncertain landscape—was

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a Corot, nor that the canvas beside it was a genuine Romney, but he had classed the embellishments of the room as a whole as being "real style," and he was not exaggerating.

Turning to the characters of the men about him, on the other hand, he was only too well aware that here he would find a different order, but for the time being he was content to let affairs remain as they were.

He selected a cigar, and pierced it with studied indifference, but nevertheless the hand which he raised with the lighted match was inclined to shake just a trifle.

"We have very good reports of you here, Neile," observed the man by his side, casually referring to some notes. "You have an important post in your position as chief at the coast town. You have served us well—as yet."

The man moistened his dry lips.

"There was the unfortunate case of that intruder——" He referred again to the papers. "Ah, yes—Denbigh. You dealt with him quite successfully, I admit. At the same time, the very fact of his presence forces the demand for extra vigilance."

Neile was about to interrupt, but the speaker checked him by raising his hand.

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“ You were ordered to report here to-night for two reasons. One is to warn you that the Chief may soon be honouring you with a personal visit, and, secondly, to tell you the reason for his sudden decision. It is simply this ; you are being watched.”

The man turned a startled face.

“ Me, d’you mean ? ” he gasped, with a quick intake of breath.

One of the others laughed drily.

“ Don’t be a damned fool,” was his remark. “ Put him wise, Number Twenty-three.”

The young man so addressed turned his flashing eyes to the trembling Neile.

“ What’s bitten you, you swine ? ” he hissed. “ We picked you through the part you played in the Deptford case. We know you murdered Leeney as clearly as——”

“ Yus, and you’ve held it over me ever since,” the man snarled. “ I’ve been watched for months, and I still do the dangerous work on the coast. Sometimes I think I’d rather hang than have those eyes of his peering at me. Usually after dark they come——”

“ Silence ! ” thundered Number Twenty-three. “ We’ve heard all your darned whines before. But now listen to me.” He paused dramatically. There was a dead silence. Somewhere a clock struck the half-hour.

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"We're all in this. When I said you are being watched, I meant the whole crowd of you, collectively, not individually. And I know already who one of our greatest enemies is. It's Blake, and he's a free lance, so he's dangerous. And there's another, too, but I haven't spotted him yet—although I know he's from headquarters. Blake, I imagine, fancies that our energies are centred in London. The other may be striking out down your way, so you will be prepared, Neile."

The man nodded slowly.

"As for the Chief, God knows where he is, or even who he is, but his orders are straightforward and good enough for us."

"Ain't *you* even ever seen 'im, then?" demanded Neile suspiciously.

Number Twenty-three shook his head.

"No, but you have, haven't you?" he asked, looking across at the man immediately opposite.

But the only response was a shrug of his shoulders.

Neile glanced over quickly.

"Then do I return to-night?" he asked.

"No," came the answer. "You'll be wanted round here for a day or two. Mac will be going down in the car to-night, and

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he'll attend to things until the boat comes in. I may go down with him and return in a day or two ; that's not been decided yet."

He glanced away from the ring of eager faces which regarded him so intently, and for a moment his gaze chanced to rest on the windows at his side. They had been shuttered when Neile entered, but one of them had now, quite inexplicably, swung slightly open. In the chink thus formed showed the white blur of a face, glaring into the lighted room from the outer darkness.

Somebody started up from the table with a stifled cry, and dashed over and switched off the lamps, while Neile, being nearest, flung open the windows and, as they crowded round him, there swept in a blast of keen, cold air. They watched, and, as they waited, the form of a running figure detached itself from the shade of the distant belt of trees and sped away down the drive. The final glimpse was that of a slim form, which suddenly emerged into the light of the lamp in the lane just outside. For an instant they caught a view of the head and shoulders, and there came to them an impression of slim legs and a short skirt, and finally the sound of a motor starting up.

"By God!" yelled Number Twenty-three. "It was a woman!" He blundered across

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the darkened room and flung open the door.

“ Mac ! ” he shouted.

There came a faint answer from the back of the house.

“ Get the car round immediately. Move, man ! ”

CHAPTER II

LIEUTENANT REGINALD CARSTAIRS, Royal Navy, known for some inexplicable reason to his intimates as "George," drove a battered two-seater Morris, and was wishing at the moment that his wind-screen wiper had not broken down. It was not actually snowing, but a dark bank of heavy clouds rolling up from the south was threatening the moon, which shone out fitfully in the centre of a ring of low, swirling mist.

Driving, already difficult enough by reason of a frosted-over glass screen, was rendered even more involved by the atrocious state of the country roads.

He had started out from Harwich that afternoon, and the going had been good for some time. But his way was leading him steadily to the north and eastward, and as he progressed the road grew gradually worse. Carstairs glanced at a clock on the dashboard, and was amazed to find that the time was already drawing on towards nine, and, with fully twenty miles yet to be covered, he found the reference far from reassuring.

Just outside Holmworth he eased down,

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cleaned off the surface of the glass in front of him, and then, turning off the main London road, proceeded to pick his way carefully down a well-remembered by-lane.

It was a part of the country that he knew perfectly, for he had been born and bred in Suffolk. Mr. Justice Carstairs, his father, now dead these ten years, had been quite an institution along this stretch of the east coast, and, before the days when the son had been orphaned and the time when their capital had sunk in the wrecking of Russia, they had owned the Manor House near Dunwich. But death had struck with the financial crisis, and the boy, then a sub-lieutenant in the Mediterranean Fleet, had returned to a parentless and ruined home. The sale of the house and effects had barely covered the outstanding debts. Nevertheless, the young man, now nearing the next step of promotion, always chose this part of the world for a retreat during his periods of short leave. Brenport was his aim for this season; he had hoped to reach it by supper-time, and it was already half-past nine. He stamped impatiently on the accelerator.

The watery moon was by now entirely overshadowed, for the wild scurry of ominous clouds had done their work well.

Carstairs breathed a prayer to heaven for

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the rain, or snow which threatened, to hold up for a few more minutes, and switched on the glaring head-lamps.

He drove on watchfully, every now and then referring to the speedometer needle by the clock-side. It was very dark, and very still. Only the moan and whisper of the wind in the topmost branches of the trees at his side came to break the silence. Indeed he was just thinking that the roads he had traversed had been abnormally void of traffic, when his sensitive ear caught a new sound in the night air.

Carstairs slowed up and listened intently, and then, above the hum of his own motor, came the sound of another car creeping along at a careful speed.

The noise was coming down with the wind, so it might easily have been the roar of an engine in the far distance. He looked quickly back. There was no sign nor movement on the road behind him, and it was from the southward that the sounds were coming.

He pressed on with a more wary eye this time, and presently it seemed that the other car, which had been following his road, had taken another turning, for the beat of its engine was growing less distinct.

Somehow the incident struck Carstairs with a faint significance, and it was some

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time before he realised that his radiator thermometer was registering several degrees above the normal. He pulled up and stepped to the bonnet, and ran his hand over the rim at the front. It was hot—uncomfortably so.

He unscrewed the cap, and found that the container was almost dry ; a jet of steam issued out as the last thread was unscrewed.

“ Snakes ! That’s torn it ! ” Carstairs bent down to inspect the grid.

“ I wonder.” He straightened up and pushed his cap back off his forehead, and finally had to admit to himself that he had come out and failed to see that the radiator was full. The little water it had previously contained had boiled away, and the engine was already over-heating, despite the bitterly cold night air. The question of the moment was where the required supply was coming from.

He looked dismally about, but the way-side puddles were iced over and solid ; then he happened to walk across and glance over the far hedge, and remembered Danny’s cottage.

Until this moment he had not realised how close he was to the old recluse’s hermitage, although now, as he looked about him, he recognised the old moss-grown wall, the

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rickety gate, and the dark grove of trees under which his car now stood.

He walked back across the road and switched off the glaring head-lamps; then, picking a torch out of the dashboard locker, he stumbled back through the pitch darkness and directed the beam on to the uneven surface of the lane.

Old man Danny, who, Carstairs reflected, must now be nearing his eightieth year, lived alone in this out-of-the-way dwelling, with the exception of his grandson, a likely boy who had always entertained a passion for the sea. But Carstairs had lost sight of them for many years, although he could distinctly remember driving over in the days long past with some trifling present for the lonely man. His mother had always been considered the lady bountiful of the countryside. Danny was one of her special protégés, and none had lamented the news of her death more strongly than he. These thoughts were running through Carstairs' mind as he tramped across the uncared-for garden, now a mass of weeds. Trailing branches, dripping with moisture, whipped back into his face, and at one point he stopped dead and thought he heard the sound of a motor engine again. Then, rebuking himself, he moved on. Why shouldn't a car follow him along a public road?

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Presently he came to the door and knocked loudly.

Then he stood, waiting impatiently enough, and began to tap on the stone steps with the toe of his shoe.

There came no answer. He walked out a few paces and stared up at the windows ; they were dark and curtainless. Finally he stepped back and beat another loud tattoo, and this time something happened. For, even as he stood with his hand on the knocker, he noticed that the door had swung open and stood just ajar.

He pushed, and it yawned wide, for it had obviously never been fastened. Flashing his torch about, Carstairs entered, and was about to call out when the silence of the place was disclosed to him. Stealthily he moved from room to room, yet they all told the same story.

Danny's cottage was empty.

And why not ?

Carstairs began to think over the facts frankly. He had not heard from the old man for years ; had, indeed, lost touch with him completely. Listlessly, as he wandered round to the back of the cottage in search of a tap, he wondered if young Danny had got his wish and gone to sea. Suddenly a fresh thought struck him. Perhaps the old

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man was dead. If he were, he had possibly died in one of those empty rooms upstairs.

He paused in the tiny hall-way and questioned the silence of the place. Fancy feeling nervy over poor old Danny, alive or dead !

He laughed quietly, and then of a sudden caught his breath, and, extinguishing his torch, crouched back into the shadow of the stairs. The darkness had been intense, and the silence as complete, but was the cottage as empty as he had supposed ?

The unlatched door which had yielded to his touch was easy enough to explain away as merely the carelessness of a local house-agent, but that muffled sound, the one which had come to him even as the smile had curled his lips, was that as simple to interpret ?

Whatever had caused that slight noise, it was as inexplicable as it was unexpected, and Carstairs had hardly taken up his position before he became aware that his suspicions had not been altogether unfounded. He listened, and, as his eyes vainly tried to pierce the darkness, he became aware of a weird shuffling step on the landing above. The footfalls advanced stealthily to the stair-head and then ceased. There followed a silence, and with it shone out a glimmer of light.

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Carstairs, crushed into the smallest possible compass under the banisters, breathlessly waited.

Presently, the tread recommenced, and then came the creak of the topmost stair. The illumination was increasing as the source of light advanced, and with it came the Unknown.

Three steps down and the faint glimmer was extinguished ; the outer door had swung open suddenly, and a bitterly cold draught came blasting across the passage-way.

A match scraped, and, as the tiny flame leaped up, Carstairs moved into the open. There followed a shuddering sob : and, as the match burnt out, he got a momentary vision of a young girl with blazing eyes, a mop of hair the colour of old gold, and features of tragic beauty.

The sight had been one of but an instant, an instant during which she had returned his gaze with a swift, fear-ridden stare. Then the darkness had come swooping down again, as impenetrable as ever—but not before Carstairs had seen that the girl's left leg, already raised to the step above in preparation for retreat, was shod with the hideous boot of the club-footed.

CHAPTER III

"DON'T move!" Carstairs snapped the words out sharply, switched on the torch, and clutched at the small white hand which grasped frenziedly at the stair-rail just above his head.

That she was frightened, badly frightened, he could see at a glance, and he felt rather a brute as he now bent his arm and drew the wavering girl gently, but relentlessly, down the steps to his own level.

He studied her intently under the bright beam of his lamp, and noticed, with evident admiration, that she was rapidly regaining her nerve. He could see that his unexpected presence had scared her badly, and he found himself respecting her pluck in standing up to him.

Carstairs glanced quickly above to see if she were alone, and, as he did so, she spoke.

"What are you doing here?" she asked quickly, and so breathlessly that he laughed and bent his head to meet her eyes.

"Well, you're a cool one," he said. "I was just going to ask you that myself."

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His swift smile seemed to reassure her, and for a moment she lost the haunted stare. She shook her wrist free and returned his expression with a challenging gaze.

"I'm waiting," she reminded him.

"As a matter of fact, I was hunting for some water," he remarked disarmingly.

"Water?" The girl's tone was incredulous.

"Yes, my radiator's gone dry."

He was about to explain, but she suddenly interrupted him.

"Then is that your car under the trees outside?"

Carstairs inclined his head gravely.

"The rusty Morris, do you mean? Yes."

The girl seemed somehow relieved, and yet, as they talked, there came the faint sound of an engine, running slowly in the road outside.

Again the expression of fearful concern spread over the girl's face.

"I must go," she cried, glancing apprehensively about her. For a moment she looked up at him with wistful alarm showing in the soft grey eyes. "The well may not be iced over—you'll find it in the yard at the back."

In a flash she had turned, and would have darted away had not Carstairs gripped her wrist again and swung her back to face him.

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"Not so fast, my lady," he said in a calm voice. "Your pals may be pinching my auto, although from the sound of that engine there's another car outside—a six-cylinder, I should say—but now I want to talk to you."

He paused as a sudden idea came to him.

"By the way, has it been you who've been following me all the evening?"

She did not reply, but he read the answer in her upturned features.

"Oh, so it was, eh? Well, do you mind telling me exactly what you want, and what you're doing in old Danny's empty cottage at this hour?"

He felt her shudder, terrified in his grip.

"I dare not tell," she admitted presently. "Oh, do believe me, and do please let me go."

She sounded genuine enough in her distress and, although Carstairs could not find it in him to distrust her, he neither loosened his hold nor withdrew his gaze from her face.

"Tell me why you are here," he demanded, but then decided to make his question less general. "Did you expect to meet someone else?"

"Yes—oh, yes! Now, please let me go."

But he still refused to release her.

Then she surprised him by asking a question herself.

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“ Do you know of a man called Neile ? ” she demanded.

Carstairs thought quickly.

“ Yes, I rather fancy I know the name—played for the Services once, didn’t he ? Or am I mixin’ him up ? ”

“ I think you must be,” she smiled grimly. “ I don’t think that can have been the man.”

He was surprised to note the tone of relief in her voice.

But she was speaking again now.

“ Do you know Hampstead Heath ? ”

“ No, never been there.”

Once again she smiled, and the expression seemed to decide him.

He released his grip, and stood quickly aside to let her pass.

“ Good-bye, little girl,” he muttered softly.

He elevated his eyes from the mis-shapen boot and touched his hat with his free hand.

“ Good-bye.”

She paused for a moment, wonderingly, then turned and, in an instant, was gone. But not before he had heard a man’s voice calling to her from the road outside.

“ Anne ! ”

But now that he was alone, Carstairs wheeled round with a faint shrug and began his search for the well.

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It took some minutes to find it, and a few more to break the surface ice and carry off a brimming bucketful. But finally, when the radiator cap had been replaced and the self-starter put into action, he found that he had wasted a full half-hour.

When he climbed back into his seat behind the wheel, he sank back in a retrospective frame of mind before he let in the clutch and set the car in motion again.

To say that the recent encounter had left him unmoved, would not have been stating the true facts of the case. He was deeply interested, and worried too, although he would probably never have admitted it. A series of questions raced through his mind, but, try as he would, he failed to find the solution to even the most obvious of them.

The engine was purring out, and he let it run on slowly to warm through, and, during the interval, decided to put up the hood. It was a clammy business, for the folds were moist and sodden. But suddenly, as he worked, he became aware of a faint creaking noise just above his head.

He looked up and, for the first time, gathered a shred of evidence, one which he had expected ever since the front door had given in to his touch. A hanging board, just over the car, lazily swinging to the

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scurry of the high wind, advertised : " This desirable Cottage for Sale." And the notice had obviously hung there some time.

So much was proved, at any rate. Danny had left and at least a year ago, judging by the age of the placard, but the other obstacles still remained.

It was reasonable to suppose that an empty house offered for sale would be deserted during the night, particularly when it was distinctly cold and wet, and, incidentally, in mid-winter. Nevertheless the obvious had proved deceptive, for the presence of the girl was a question which would have taken much explaining away. He was practically certain that the place had been quite empty when he had entered first, so the incident pointed to the fact that she had arrived while he was in the kitchen and, unknown to him, ascended to the first floor.

So far his suppositions hung together, but how could he account for the mysterious someone else whom she had obviously expected to meet ? Was it Neile ? And if so, what connection was there between him and Hampstead Heath ?

He reviewed in his mind all that he knew or had ever heard of the place. Somehow he found himself associating it with costers and Bank Holidays.

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Presently he shook his head and let in the clutch, and, as the car moved slowly forward and out of the deepest shadow under the trees, he began to whistle.

For how was he to know of the powerful organisation whose headquarters was centred about this district in North London, or of the fact that the girl he had heard addressed as Anne had actually spied upon them that very night, at the risk of her own life?

But, even if he had known, he would never have guessed how very close about them all hung the deadly web of destruction.

CHAPTER IV

BRENPORT was situated in the centre of a wide bay, and was reached by a narrow-gauge railway which ran out ten weary miles to the coast. The road was rough and precipitous, and turned off sharply on the crest of the hills which overlooked the back of the village, and wound steeply down to the sea. At the beach it turned again, and climbed round the coast to the northward, but as the surface was treacherous and the train service abnormally deficient, the place was left singularly unvisited—contingencies which added greatly to the attraction of its recognised natural beauty.

Carstairs picked his way carefully around the cliff road, and presently turned off to the right. A white sign-post, whose arms had suddenly loomed up out of the darkness, directed him to the track which led steadily downhill and towards the coast.

He had had an adventurous trip, and had mistaken his road at least twice, thus being forced to make a double detour, and this had wasted his time and tested his patience sorely. But now he was nearly "home."

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He passed a church and a deserted school-house, and presently came to a dark out-building with a stable yard, echoing with the baying of a hound. The hill grew more severe now, and Carstairs discovered that it required all his nerve to handle the gear and brake-levers and negotiate the last corner.

The turn brought him into sight of the main village street, and to one side he saw the lamps of the Red Lion Inn still burning brightly. Opposite, glowed the lights of another and less pretentious hostelry. He allowed the car to creep slowly onward, and passed a dim line of shops and cottages, whose small diamond-shaped windows reflected his head-lamps in a succession of rapid flashes.

Half-way down he drew level with a darkened covered archway, and wrenched over the wheel. Next minute he had run through the inn yard and driven slowly into the open garage, which showed dimly on the far side.

As the engine roared down to a standstill, a young stable hand came forward, to whom he gave a few directions, and then stepped briskly up to the parlour, where he was heartily welcomed by Sam Livesay, proprietor and general factotum of the Red Lion Inn.

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"Come in, sir. Why, bless me if it isn't young Mr. Carstairs himself, five years older and developed into a full-grown man." He looked with evident admiration at the tall figure and wrung him warmly by the hand.

"Well, I bet you're feeling pretty cold and tired, but we expected you before this, you know. Break down? Well, never mind," he rattled on, heedless of answers or explanation. "We're very glad to see you any time, eh, Martha?" he asked, turning for confirmation to his buxom wife who had just entered.

Supper appeared presently, and Carstairs set to hungrily, with the old landlord hovering close to see that everything was to hand and precisely to his liking, and later joined him in a glass of the house's special old port.

Carstairs raised his glass and drank to the perfect host, which made old Sam blush.

He laughed.

"It isn't often that we have the pleasure of entertaining such an old customer as yourself, sir," he said smiling. "Why, I can recall the day when your father brought you in here first. You must have been so high."

He indicated the stature of a child of about six years.

"But, o' course, you wouldn't recollect *me* then."

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Carstairs did not happen to remember him and, to save appearances, changed the subject quickly.

“Have you got many people staying in the house?”

The old man shook his head. “Not many, though not so bad for this time o’ year, o’ course. There’s one or two commercials. And we had a middle-aged gent and his daughter, only they’ve been gone a day or two now, but I’m expecting another gentleman in to-night. Should have been here by now.” He referred to the loudly ticking clock over the hearth, whose hands pointed to eleven o’clock. “Yes, he should have showed up by now,” he repeated.

Carstairs rose and walked over to the parlour windows. He found that he was now looking out over the yard, and was about to turn and put some question to the other when his quick ears caught the sound of a car moving just below him.

He looked casually out, and then suddenly stiffened into instant attention.

The car had now come to a standstill outside, and, as he looked at it, he suddenly felt the conviction sweeping over him that it was his.

“That’ll be him, I expect,” murmured

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Sam, but Carstairs was half-way over to the door by now.

"Maybe you're right," he said, "but I rather fancy that somebody's trying to pinch my flivver again."

He ran out and soon saw that his suspicions were unfounded, for the car which now occupied a corner of the yard, although identical in make and model, carried different number plates; incidentally, through the half-open garage door, he could see the familiar bonnet of his own.

He was about to return to the house when he heard the sudden ring of a footstep just behind him, and swung round to find himself face to face with a stranger.

"Got a light, guv'nor?"

Carstairs produced a match and eyed the newcomer distastefully. He was a tall, broad-shouldered, rather seedy-looking individual, with red-rimmed eyes and a frayed coat collar. Somehow he had imagined that the footstep might have belonged to the owner of the newly-arrived car, but both the man's appearance and his next remark belied this conjecture.

"Nice cawr you've got there."

The words were spoken in a gruff voice, and the accent was reminiscent of Seven Dials.

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Carstairs neither agreed with nor refuted the statement, but received his returned matchbox in silence. And presently the man lounged off ; but, as he passed through the beam of light which streamed out of the parlour windows, Carstairs noticed that the left side of his face was disfigured by a broad scar.

A moment later he had re-entered the inn by the side door and, as he went slowly up to his bedroom, he found himself wondering if that was the last he was to see of this man—the man with the broad scar.

CHAPTER V

CARSTAIRS rose late the next morning, and by the time he had descended to the coffee-room he found that the others had already breakfasted, and for the greater part of the meal he was alone.

Sam Livesay put in an appearance towards the end of the marmalade stage.

"I hope you slept well, Mr. Carstairs," were his first words, anxiously spoken.

The young man smiled at him over the top of his second cup of coffee.

"Too well. If I stop here much longer I shall develop into a regular dormouse."

He pushed his chair back from the table and felt for his cigarette-case.

"Did that fellow turn up all right last night?" he asked, striking a match and drawing quickly on his cigarette.

"Yes, just before you went up to bed. That was his car you saw in the yard and thought was yours. But, funnily enough, he remarked on the resemblance himself this morning."

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“ Oh, so he’s up and about already ? ”

Sam laughed. “ God bless my soul, yes. Up and breakfasted and away this full hour now. He’s a live one is Mr. Twysden.”

Carstairs interrupted him. “ What name did you say ? ”

“ Twysden—Timothy Twysden.”

“ Does he come here often ? ”

Sam Livesay considered. “ Yes, a fairish amount lately. I rather fancy that he’s keen on the fishing, same as you. I’ve often seen him out in his boat round by Fisherman’s Cove.”

Carstairs smiled quickly. “ Well, I bet you don’t see him doing much of that at this time of year.”

“ Oh, don’t I ? ” demanded Sam. “ That just shows what a little you know about him. He’s a keen sportsman, is Mr. Twysden, although many’s the time he’s come back hungry and wet, with nary so much as a bite all day.”

“ H’m. Bit of an enthusiast.”

“ You’re right, Mr. Carstairs,” grinned the old man, “ and I take it that your gun-case means that you don’t intend joining him.”

Carstairs inclined his head. “ Yes. There’s not so much of the ‘ busman’s

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holiday ' about me as you seem to imagine, though I wouldn't mind a day or two out on the shoals. Old Skinner's boats are still fit for service, I suppose? "

Livesay nodded. " Oh, yes, and the old man himself as talkative as ever—like me, I expect you're saying."

" No, never," smiled Carstairs. " But, seriously now, I've got about another week, and it would just give me a good chance at that bit of rough shooting of yours. You remember I wrote you about it. It must be absolutely overrun with rabbits by now." He nodded across to the wide fireplace, where a sleepy-eyed spaniel was trying his best not to look self-conscious. " It'll do Dazzle good to have a bit of a run, too."

" Very well, Mr. Carstairs," came his host's ready answer. " Any time you'd care to start. This afternoon, if you've a mind to. It would be doing me a good turn really. As you say, the dog's getting lazy for want of exercise." He paused. " But, bless me, Mr. Carstairs, I must be up and doing. This will never serve."

He bustled quickly towards the door, but the other called him back.

" You were talking about a man and his daughter last night," he said. " They were

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staying here quite recently—only a day or two ago, I think you said.”

His host nodded impatiently.

“Aye, and so I did, I believe.”

“Well, did you happen to notice whether the girl had a—er—a—a club foot?”

Sam looked doubtful, and scratched his head thoughtfully.

“Can’t say I did,” he murmured at length. “And you may think it strange of me not to have noticed, but there, Mr. Carstairs, I must admit I couldn’t take my eyes off her face. A real picture, that it were—rather sad, but beautiful.” The old man hesitated through lack of efficient adjectives, it seemed.

He lapsed into silence, a quiet which was suddenly broken by his being called by name from another part of the house.

When the old man had left him, Carstairs strolled out into the passage-way, where he collected his hat, and then, calling to Dazzle, he set off down the broad High Street towards the harbour, with the spaniel following close at his heels.

The main road through Brenport ran directly down to the sea, and here it turned sharp left, and cut around the cliff to the northward. To the right, the way continued in a form of promenade, in the summer usually

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crowded with trippers, but at this time of year, and on this day in particular, it showed spray-driven and desolately empty.

It was a grey December morning. Clouds, dark and ominous, were banking on the horizon to the south-east. The sea, neutral-tinted and restless, beat up against the front with unceasing monotony, and, where it touched the curving harbour wall, the rim of the surge was bordered with foam.

Carstairs found Skinner in a small boat-house, seated on an overturned skiff. As he entered, the man looked up and regarded him fixedly, and then suddenly he rose and withdrew the old clay pipe from between his lips.

“ Morning, Mr. Skinner.”

But it was a moment or two before the old boatman came to a decision.

“ Dang me ! Mr. Carstairs, as I live. How be you, sir ? ”

A lean, well-browned arm, and a hand freely stained and besmeared with tar, went out to welcome the young sailor.

Carstairs seated himself on a box, and drew out his pipe.

“ Some time since we went for a pull, isn't it ? ” was his first remark.

“ It must be five years if it's a day. Not that they've changed you much. Well, sir,

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an' how's the service a'going on?" For Skinner always evinced much interest about naval matters. He was an old pensioner himself.

"Oh, so, so," laughed Carstairs. "I've specialised in submarines since I saw you last, by the way."

The old man looked up, aghast.

"Not you! You don't mean that's the truth?"

"Yes, I do, and why not? I'm first lieutenant in one of the latest."

But old Skinner could do nothing save shake his grey head sorrowfully.

Presently he looked across sharply.

"You'll be on leave now, I take it?"

Carstairs nodded.

"Yes, I took the first whack, but it means that I shall have to be back before Christmas, damn it, and I'm half-way through already." He glanced up retrospectively, and chanced to turn his head towards the heaving waters beyond the harbour.

"Hullo!" he said. "Who's the intrepid seaman?"

Skinner's gaze followed the direction of his eyes.

"Ah, that'll be young Mr. Twysden, I expect."

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A trim launch, with a small auxiliary engine in the stern sheets, was just about to navigate the heap of rocks piled at the head of the breakwater. Presently it swung alongside some steps in the calmer water, and drew up with a swirl of foam under the quarter.

A broad-shouldered, oilskin-clad figure leapt out and secured the painter, and then strode off up towards the town with a vigorous step.

"Twysden, did you say? That must be the young fellow Livesay was talking about this morning."

"Aye," said Skinner. "Maybe. He usually puts up at the Red Lion."

"Who is he?" demanded Carstairs casually.

Skinner shook his head.

"Lord love me, I don't know," he had to admit.

"But that's one of your boats, isn't it?"

"Yes, but all I know is that he hires it regular and pays like clockwork."

"H'm." Carstairs sank into a thoughtful frame of mind and, pushing his hat back off his forehead, ran his fingers through his dark hair.

Presently he rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting along. Glad

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to have seen you. I was thinking that we might go out on one of our fishing expeditions one of these fine days."

The older man straightened up with glistening eyes.

"Any day you like to mention, Mr. Carstairs. You know where to find me—only too glad of a change. It's a poor heart wot never rejoices, but somehow I often find myself longin' for the days when I was in the old Pacific Squadron."

Carstairs smiled as he turned away.

"Do you find life so very dull, then?"

The older man struck his thigh with the open palm of his hand.

"Dull? I tell you, sir, it keeps me awake at night sometimes. Nothing ever happens down here. It's a regular event even seeing a stranger. But there now, I won't be keeping you any longer. Good day, sir."

"Good-bye," called Carstairs from the door. "Come along, Dazzle."

Then he walked slowly back along the front, and up the High Street to the Red Lion Inn. He passed on, sunk in thought, and at one corner failed to notice a pair of very keen eyes which had followed his movements all the morning, and now watched him until he was out of sight.

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For Carstairs was ruminating on the last few words that Skinner had spoken, and wondering very much if the old man had been correct in his statement that "nothing ever happened" in sleepy little Brenport. Perhaps he would have smiled if he had been capable of foreseeing the happenings which the next few days were to bring.

CHAPTER VI

It was fully half-past three before Carstairs picked up his gun and, whistling to Dazzle, stepped out for the cliff road.

His way this time led him up-hill, and he had walked for a steady ten minutes before he finally came to a stile, which opened out to the left. He vaulted it and strode on again. Keeping to a narrow bridle-path to begin with, he presently turned off and breasted his way through a clinging belt of broom.

It was a still day ; no wind came to stir the branches overhead nor bend the hedges at his side. The only noise he heard was the crackling of the undergrowth caused by the dog's and his own passage through it, and the distant boom of the surf as it dashed up on to the rocks beyond the gorse clumps, hundreds of feet below.

Once, it seemed to him, he caught a distant sound through the trees by his side, and suppressed a short gasp as he paused suddenly to test whether he had been mistaken or not. But the noise was not repeated.

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He walked steadily on.

The country he now moved in shut off his view from all except his immediate surroundings. This stretch of land, known locally as "The Cliffs," was actually a lonely expanse of uncultivated ground, heavily overgrown by bracken and gorse, and, near the edge, with low, stunted bushes. In places the undergrowth opened out, and here appeared sand-pits and grass-covered vales, where rabbits lurked and bred in their hundreds.

Few people ever came this way, or disturbed them, and the warrens grew and multiplied, and it was towards one of these corners, hired by Sam Livesay, that Carstairs was now making his way.

By the time he had reached the point he had aimed for, the light was growing bad, and the ensuing sport was worse. It was dusk before he collected up his meagre bag and turned his face for home, and he supposed that it must have been the last gleams of the setting sun which made him glance behind him and see the House.

He moved out of his path, and far to one side, before he got a clear view of it. It stood on a headland, nearly a mile away, and the discoloured walls glinted white in the dying rays. It was ugly enough, but

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Carstairs had to admit to himself that it had made a form of impression on him ; but then, turning, he moved on again towards home.

He was walking quickly and thinking of nothing much in particular, except perhaps the appeal he had seen so recently in a pair of grey eyes, when he suddenly realised that the dog was with him no longer.

He called, but there came no answering bark. Then he looked anxiously about, for it was speedily becoming quite overcast ; but nowhere, amongst the clumps of close bracken, did he see the heads bending and quivering, nor hear the rustle caused by the shaggy body, which he had noticed during the outgoing journey.

He called again, but all he wakened was a mocking echo.

Carstairs shivered slightly, and deliberated on what form his next move should take.

Presently he decided to return to the warren.

He walked back slowly, peering intently into the shadows. Every now and then he paused in his stride, but each time it seemed he was to be met with disappointment.

It was some time later before he finally gave up the search, and he turned dismally back to the village. How he was going to

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face Livesay and tell him of the loss, he hated to think, but the ordeal would have to be faced, and the blame all devolved upon him.

The sudden disappearance was quite inexplicable to him, for, as far as he could remember, the dog had been close to his side practically all the afternoon, except when actually retrieving, until he suddenly remembered an occurrence just before he had left the warren.

The crack of a stick had sounded close at hand, and Dazzle had bounded off to investigate. The dog had certainly reappeared, but had he returned to his hunt in the bushes a few moments later? It was from that time that Carstairs was unable to recollect exactly if he had seen the spaniel again.

He plodded on, crestfallen and thoughtful, and suddenly realised that he was breasting a slight slope. Looking about, he began to realise how far off the beaten track he had come in his search for the lost dog. He was slowly mounting a slight eminence and presently stood at its summit.

Carstairs glanced quickly round, and had just decided on his next move, along a road which would lead him directly towards the village, when he chanced to look in one direction and again saw the House. Sombre

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shadows enshrouded it. About the ground-floor windows swirled faint wisps of a creeping sea-fog, and no sign of smoke showed at any of the twisted chimneys.

Some moments he stood there, attempting to assemble his varied thoughts, until an unpleasant belief came to him—an idea which soon grew into certainty—that he was being watched.

He turned uneasily to face the sea, but everything was peaceful. Nothing stirred, nothing was to be seen, except somewhere in front, where a night bird was hovering with a weird beat of wings.

Presently a hushed night wind sent a chill blast through the leafless branches above his head. Yet still the strange sensation persisted.

Instinctively he drew the gun from under his arm, and slipped a cartridge in the open breach. It was a relief to balance the loaded weapon in his hand and finger the smooth stock.

Breathless and alert, he strode off down the uneven slope, and then, as he heard a sudden step behind him, he swung round, but as he turned, his gun caught up and hung immovable in the near bushes.

With a horrified cry he dropped the useless weapon and sprang forward, for over him

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loomed the dark shadow of a man, and Death looked out at him through the masked and flashing eyes.

He struck upwards, frenziedly, and all his weight was behind the blow. The man who had followed him was tall, and, standing as he now did on higher ground, he looked menacing and enormous.

As Carstairs lunged to strike, a revolver exploded almost in his face and he staggered back, blinded and half mad with pain. Then he threw himself forward once again, but his clutching fingers found nothing. At his side there came the crackle and brushing of torn undergrowth.

Carstairs followed the sound and, as the seconds passed, the searing pain in his eyes ceased, and he crashed onwards with the fervour of the hunter.

Gun forgotten, hat displaced and dropped—goodness knows where—clothes torn in a hundred places by the gashing thorns, he rushed forward. Directly in front sounded the flying footsteps, speeding away from the judgment of a primitive instinct, and the scene of a premeditated dastardly attempt on a fellow-creature's life.

But the night was almost come, and with it a complete, pitchy darkness. And to Carstairs' chagrin, as the fleeting seconds passed,

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the sounds of the pursued were rapidly dying away almost to silence.

And yet, even as he ran, a slim female figure detached itself from a clump of trees close by, and hobbled out to meet him, with anxious, clinging arms.

CHAPTER VII

CARSTAIRS, who had pulled up suddenly in the midst of his headlong pursuit, looked doubtfully down into the girl's upturned face.

"Why—it's Anne," he breathed, rather surprised at himself for the ease with which he used the Christian name.

She returned his gaze with a rare smile, but allowed her restraining hand to remain on his arm.

"You mustn't go on another step. The man has got clean away by now, and even if you followed——"

"Yes?"

"It would mean certain death."

He stepped back aghast, but presently a contemptuous smile curled his lips.

"Look here," he said, "are you trying to shield that cur—I mean, do you expect me to take you seriously?"

Anne remained impassive, though her voice became a little colder.

"You can think what you like," she persisted, "but I assure you that I know what

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I'm talking about. The people you're up against——”

“ People I'm up against ? ” Carstairs' voice sounded sceptical. “ Look here, Anne—that is, Miss——”

He floundered hopelessly, but the girl appeared not to hear him and stood motionless, though on occasion she would look quickly about and test the deepest shadows which encircled them.

“ You're surrounded by dangers, we both are, and there are others besides. The man whom you were following is one of our common enemies.”

Carstairs brushed his hand wearily across his eyes, and his fingers came away stained with powder dust. The girl looked up and suddenly saw the livid line across his cheek.

“ What's that ? ” she asked in a hushed voice, tracing the line of the bullet-track with a white finger.

Carstairs grinned.

“ Our mutual friend ‘ pulled a gun ’ on me just now,” he said. “ He was so close I could almost see the shot coming up the barrel.”

“ Was that the man you were chasing ? Would you be able to recognise him again ? ”

He shook his head grimly.

“ 'Fraid not. He was masked. All I could

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see was that he seemed to be a six-footer and broad in proportion." He deliberated for a moment. "But, strangely enough," he concluded, "I seemed to recognise his eyes somehow. I've seen them before, I could swear, and lately too."

The fact seemed to puzzle him, and presently he sank into silence.

They were walking slowly towards the village now.

Suddenly he turned to the girl, limping painfully at his side.

"What were you doing out here on the cliffs, and alone, at this time of night?"

She smiled back into his anxious face. "I was waiting for somebody," she said. "Somebody we've been expecting to see for months. But he never came back."

"Oh, it is a 'he,' is it?"

The girl inclined her head.

"Yes, a man called Denbigh."

"Oh!" Carstairs looked at her doubtfully again. "Any connection with friend Neile?"

Anne stopped dead and he saw a wave of colour sweep over the delicate features.

"Neile!" She seemed to breathe the name. "I believe Neile was the man who killed him."

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It was Carstairs' turn to appear perturbed.

"Killed him? I never remember hearing about the case."

"No, perhaps not. As far as I know it was never reported, and, incidentally, we aren't sure if he was murdered or not. You see, he disappeared and, although I just know he's dead, no one has ever found the body."

"We *are* being jolly, aren't we?"

But Anne swung round on him disdainfully.

"I don't think this subject calls for much joking. I think it's—terrible," and there sounded a tremor in the young voice.

Carstairs turned to her and extended both his hands.

"I'm desperately sorry," he murmured. "Forgive me, or, if you can't do that, try and forget. It was awful, but somehow—blame it on the war if you like—I'm beginning to look on life as just a little cheap."

He allowed his arms to fall to his side.

"Perhaps you're right," she said. "Although, somehow, I very much hope that you're not. I——"

Carstairs glanced down at her quickly.

"Were you—er—keen on this man?"

Anne shook her head sadly.

"No, it wasn't that, exactly. But—well, we were both working for the same side and

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that move we lost. And with it, I feel convinced, went his life."

There followed a short pause, but presently :

" I understand," he said.

They were walking on again now, and soon—almost at their feet it seemed—they glimpsed the twinkling lights of the little village below them.

They stopped, and Carstairs looked down at the small face questioningly.

She read the enquiry in his eyes.

" I must go now. This is where we separate once again. I'm sorry."

She allowed her hand to rest on his arm for a moment, and then, quite suddenly, she turned away.

Carstairs held out his hand.

" Stop a minute," he begged, and then, as she glanced up, he added : " When am I going to see you again ? "

The question seemed to puzzle her, for she stood quite still for some moments before she answered. But even then her reply was uncertain.

" What a little mystery girl you are," he murmured, staring fixedly down at the young figure in the tight jumper suit. " Don't you mind, really ? "

She looked back and it struck him that her

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glance was troubled and not unmixed with a faint tone of wistfulness.

"Oh, I don't know," she admitted after a pause. "Somehow you're beginning to make things so much more difficult. Please don't misunderstand me," she continued quickly. "But I can see so plainly that you're being led into difficulties and dangers that you can know nothing about. No, please let me finish."

He had seemed about to interrupt.

"At the moment I believe that you're being mistaken for somebody else."

A light began to dawn in Carstairs' mind.

"And, sooner or later, they will find their error, and you will be safe. But now there is another fear. Every minute we are together will prove dangerous for you. I am being watched, as you have been——"

"By the police?"

But she ignored his question completely. "And so we must separate. For a time, at least. But now I must fly."

Carstairs clutched her small hands impetuously in his, but she shook herself free.

"I'm stopping at the Red Lion," he said hurriedly. "Any time you want me, let me know there." He jerked his head in the direction of the village.

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She thanked him with a word, and for a second a yearning look came into the anxious eyes.

“ Good-bye—Anne.”

She left him and walked slowly away, but presently she turned and waved back.

“ Good-bye and—God bless you,” she called. And then—she was gone.

But Carstairs noticed that the way she had chosen would eventually bring her to the White House.

CHAPTER VIII

THE final light of day had long since died in the sky to the westward when Carstairs eventually turned his face to the village and made his way, as rapidly as might be, towards home.

His brain was busy as he walked, and in less than no time, it seemed, he was treading the cobbled way which led straight down to the inn. The search for his gun he had abandoned till the next day, and Dazzle he had left to fend for himself. Indeed, he consoled himself with the thought that this would undoubtedly not be the first time that the dog had been lost on the cliffs.

But the man in the mask, the sudden shot in the dark, and his subsequent encounter with Anne, were subjects which lent themselves to infinite conjecture.

The girl had hinted at his being watched. The idea seemed to amuse him, but that tall stranger with the scarred face—did he fit into the picture?

He shrugged his shoulders slightly as he turned, entered the inn porch, and leapt

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quickly up the stairs to his own room before he rang the bell for Sam Livesay.

After a few minutes' delay, that worthy appeared at the door, wiping his hands on a damp cloth, but when he saw the young man's deplorable state and the savage mark reddening the right cheek and temple, he stood motionless, with his lower jaw sunk half-way to his breast.

"Come in, Sam," ordered Carstairs, "and take a chair while I shift. I've got a confession to make to you before I come down to dinner." He paused, and then turned quickly to the washstand so as to hide his marked face. "I lost Dazzle this evening."

The other laughed aloud. "Lost Dazzle! I'm not surprised, and you aren't the first either."

Livesay brightened up.

"Why, bless me, Mr. Carstairs, I was half afraid you'd brought in some bad news with you, but as for the spaniel, why, he's a proper little demon. He's always working adrift, but we'll see him back before the night's out. If that's all, I'll be hup, hoff, and hout of it."

He rose from the depths of the chair he had sunk into, but Carstairs waved him back.

"One moment," he said. "That is not all I've got to say. There's a question I want you to answer, if you can."

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"Why, certainly, Mr. Carstairs, if I can."

The young sailor looked round hurriedly for a clean shirt. He felt the other was eyeing him curiously, and he wished to conceal his expressions.

"Have you ever heard of a man called Denbigh?" he demanded suddenly.

"Denbigh!" the landlord jerked out the name in a harsh whisper. "Yes, I remember the name, and the man—distinctly."

"Ah. Well, I understand that he was last heard of near here. He disappeared quite suddenly."

The older man admitted it, though unwillingly enough.

"What else is there to know?" asked Carstairs sharply.

There followed a pause of perhaps ten seconds. Then:

"I believe he was a detective," came the slow answer.

Carstairs whistled. An additional mystery had been added to the others which centred in the little fishing village "where nothing ever happened."

"A detective?" repeated Carstairs under his breath. Then: "What makes you think that?" he demanded in a louder voice.

Sam scratched his head.

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"Now you come to mention it, sir, I be blowed if I know," he admitted eventually. "But somehow I did come to think of it, what with his queer carryings on."

"Oh, he was a strange customer, was he?"

"Aye, that he were," contended the old man. "Not that I knew much of him myself, though," he continued. "He didn't stay in this house long."

"How was that?" Carstairs waited for the answer eagerly.

Sam Livesay settled back in his chair and took a deep breath.

"Now look here, Mr. Carstairs," he said, "I can see you won't be happy till you've got the whole story out of me, so here goes, though it's little enough that I know."

He paused impressively and, after a while, having collected his thoughts, he began.

"It must be six months ago now that I first saw the man you're talking about. He was keen on doing bits of sketching, and was a bit of an artist in his way. Or so, at least, he said. He came down for a night, and eventually stopped a week, but at the end of that time he had to go."

Carstairs looked up suddenly.

"How was that?" he asked again.

"Well, it was the season," answered Livesay, "and we were pretty full, and I was all

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fixed up. But eventually I managed to get him settled at the Royal, just over the way."

The other nodded.

"Well, everything went all right for a bit. I used to see him setting out most mornings, and always by himself, for the coast road. He did a deal of studying on the cliffs. But one day he was missing, though this was nothing so very queer, mark you, for he had a passion for slinking off for whole nights at a time, on occasions."

He paused for a moment.

"But, as I say, that last time he didn't come back for forty-eight hours, and it grew into a police job, for after a while they came fussing around. At first it was thought that he'd shot the moon and done a run."

"And had he?"

Sam shook his head.

"No. Everything was regular. He had lumped down a month's board and lodging in advance, and he actually left all his belongings behind. Every stiver. Scotland Yard took a hand then, and finally we were all bound to secrecy, though goodness knows why. Naturally enough we've kept our tongues pretty quiet ever since, so as to keep up the reputation of the place, you understand, and not a soul has got a word out of me about it except you, sir."

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Carstairs bowed ironically.

"Thanks very much. Most extraordinary case. Any theories yourself?"

"Can't say I have, Mr. Carstairs, though the whole affair has caused me a deal of thought, I can tell you. Yet the man has definitely disappeared, and not a trace of him to this day, but he might be alive for all we know."

"I wonder!" Carstairs rose from his seat beside the dressing-table and set to pacing the long room.

"What made you think that the man really was a detective?" he asked at length.

Sam looked up rather hopelessly.

"Why, Scotland Yard's insistence on hushing the business up," he answered. "That, and his unnatural daily disappearances."

"H'm. Not very conclusive, I should have said. However—it was strange that Skinner knew nothing of this."

"No, not so very," contradicted the landlord, rising and making for the door. "The secret was kept pretty well. Nobody asked any questions. You'll be coming straight down to dinner, I take it, sir?"

His hand was on the knob, and he was about to revolve it, when a dark figure sped away from its position on the mat just

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outside, and made for the stairs. Just at that moment Sam looked out and heard Carstairs call him back into the room.

"Is Twysden in this evening?" he was asked.

The landlord nodded. "Yes," he said. "He's just passed along the corridor outside." Then he moved out and silently closed the door behind him.

Carstairs sat on the edge of his bed for some moments before he left his room, but eventually, when he did, it was with the thought that this leave was going to prove anything but uneventful.

And perhaps he was right.

He walked thoughtfully down the wide oak staircase, and presently entered the parlour through the small glass-panelled door.

It was brilliantly illuminated, and at a glance it could be seen that it contained but a single person, one whose broad back was presented to the room and whose sturdy figure blanked the centre place before the fire. One huge hand gripped the overmantel and one foot tapped impatiently on the hearthstones.

As the door closed behind Carstairs the stranger turned, and for the moment there was a stilly pause; each, it seemed, was taking mental stock of the other.

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He moved slowly across the room and, as he approached, the man at the fireplace moved up and made space.

Automatically Carstairs' hand went to his head, then he drew out his cigarette-case.

"Will you smoke?" he asked.

"Thanks—no—my dinner ought to be up directly." The words were spoken in a curiously deep voice.

Carstairs shrugged his shoulders and helped himself, and at the moment Livesay appeared with a tray of steaming dishes.

"Your dinner, Mr. Twysden. Shall I bring yours in here, sir?" he enquired of the other.

Carstairs nodded. "Yes, please."

He struck a match, and drew quickly at his cigarette.

For some moments there was silence, but suddenly the man at the dinner-table spoke.

"Excuse me, but are you Lieutenant Carstairs?"

The other glanced up quickly. He had apparently been looking at the ground at his feet; actually he had been studying the diner under lowered lids.

"Yes, and I think I heard Sam call you Twysden."

"That's right." The other man smiled

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quickly. "We are fellow Morris owners, I believe. That is your machine in the garage, isn't it?"

"The battered specimen? Yes."

The conversation waned, but was presently restarted by the arrival of a second tray.

They were apparently to dine together, and presently Carstairs was seated at an adjacent table.

"Don't you find it rather dull down here?"

Carstairs considered.

"Not altogether. I get in a little shooting and a bit of fishing. I usually come down hereabouts because I like it better than most places, and principally because I haven't got anywhere else to go."

Somehow the confession awakened older memories, and he sought to change the run of the conversation.

"Didn't I see you out in the bay this morning?"

Twysden pushed back a plate of soup and reached for his tankard.

"Probably. I'm out most days, but it's beginning to blow over foggy and that'll put a bit of a stopper on my recreation, I'm afraid."

"H'm—yes, I suppose it will."

For some moments the dialogue flagged

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but towards the end of the meal Carstairs asked a question.

"Did you notice that yacht that's been lying out in the bay since this morning?" he enquired.

Twysden looked across quickly.

"Yes," he said. "Why?"

"Because you must have run up pretty close alongside if you went to Fisherman's Cove this morning, and I was wondering if you saw whether she was flying any flag."

"No, I didn't notice."

And so the subject dropped.

They gathered round the open hearth after the meal and sipped their coffee meditatively, although the silence was presently broken by Twysden, who leaned forward suddenly.

"How did you manage to get your face marked like that?" he demanded.

Carstairs' hand sought his smarting cheek.

"It happened when I was out shooting to-day," he said. "I was—it got scratched a bit—er—by a bramble or something," he concluded weakly, "but I've cleaned it, and it's all right now."

"Um—bad luck," sympathised the deep voice.

Carstairs looked troubled and took a sudden gulp of hot coffee, for he saw the other knew that he lied.

CHAPTER IX

It always seemed remarkably strange to Carstairs in after-years to think that, considering he was only too eager to be alone and able to think, he lingered hour after hour with this other purposeless wanderer on that particular evening.

Time, under the present circumstances, had taken on an extra significance, for every minute that passed now transposed him further from the detection of his mysterious attacker, and any hope of an explanation of the grim secret which encircled the fateful encounter.

Twysden he had come to like and, although the attraction was difficult enough to explain, Carstairs could feel the draw of his strong personality, even as they talked, and the other certainly talked well. He put him down as a man of about thirty years of age—approximately his own—although possibly a little older, but his wide experience of life, and particularly of men, which is the more important, went to prove that his powers of perception were developed abnormally.

During the war, Carstairs deduced, his

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battlefields had varied from the West, to Mesopotamia, and even to the Far East, although in what particular capacity this had been he had neither the inclination nor the imprudence to enquire.

When he spoke, it was in a deep voice, and, on occasion, he took a draw at a large black briar, though it would seem, excepting for these times, that his main excuse for the pipe was to use the stem, at will, to accentuate some point, and present this object as a further medium of explanation.

It was towards the end of one of his intensely interesting discourses that he suddenly turned to Carstairs.

“ We were talking of frankness just now,” he said, “ and you were telling me how much it has helped you on occasions. I could see you were trying to evade the subject; that was one of my main objects in reintroducing it.”

He leaned forward suddenly.

“ Why won't you be honest with me now ? ”

The question, blunt and eager, came as a distinct break in the run of conversation, which, up till then, had been of a general character.

Carstairs returned the ardent gaze, and was surprised with himself for his ultimate decision of veiled secrecy.

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"I don't think I quite understand what you mean," he replied.

He could see that their discussion was leading them into a contest of wits, and, doubtful of the result, he temporised wildly.

The other smiled grimly.

"I'll make myself a little clearer, then. During dinner I happened to remark on that curious scar which at the moment is flushing the right side of your face, and I fancy that you made some mention of a bramble."

He hesitated deliberately.

"In the course of my life I have come into intimate contact with pistol marks, particularly those inflicted when the weapon was discharged at close quarters. I will not quote the obvious, but perhaps that may explain my request when I asked you to be a little more frank with me."

Carstairs stirred in his chair uncomfortably.

"Then you think I've been lying to you?" he demanded eventually.

Twysden inclined his head slowly.

"You have put my idea into rather strong language, but that is my contention all the same." The deep voice was insistent and rather sardonic, Carstairs thought.

"Then I won't disappoint you," was the rejoinder. "You were right." The confession came out impulsively, but somehow,

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contrary to his anticipation, Carstairs found that he did not regret it altogether. For here, friend, foe, or neutral, was someone at least to confide in.

Twysden sank back with a faint exclamation.

"Why the devil didn't you tell me about this before?" he demanded.

Carstairs smiled over at him distantly.

"Well, I didn't really see why I should."

"No, I suppose not. But, now you've gone so far, would you mind telling me exactly how it happened?"

Again a wave of uncertainty came over Carstairs, but presently he found himself speaking.

"It happened this afternoon," he began. "I'd been out shooting in the warren, on the other side of the Cliffs. It clouded over and became very dull quite suddenly, and I was half-way home before I found that Dazzle was missing."

"That's Livesay's spaniel?"

Carstairs nodded.

"I turned round and had a good hunt, and shouted, but I didn't see him again. Eventually I gave it up, and was already on the move for home when I suddenly heard the crackle of a twig just behind me. I looked

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round just in time. I was being tracked by a tall man, who, in the dim light, looked a veritable giant. But the impression was partly caused by his standing on higher ground. He was masked and armed. I hit out, and, as I struck the gun he was holding in one of his hands, it exploded, just by my right ear."

He hesitated for a moment.

"That's about all. I chased him, but he had the legs of me, and after a while I lost sight of him completely."

Twysden looked up sharply.

"And so he disappeared without giving you the least hint of who or what he was?"

"Yes," Carstairs admitted, "that's so. But, remember, it was getting quite dark and, with the exception of that first fleeting glimpse I got, I could see practically nothing."

Twysden looked vaguely annoyed.

"Didn't you get any impression, though? The man's true height, for instance, the breadth of his shoulders—anything?"

The other considered for a moment.

"Well, as a matter of fact, the man was about my own size, I should judge," he said at length.

He looked across at Twysden.

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"Or yours. Yes, it might quite easily have been you, with a black half-mask."

He laughed shortly as he made the allusion, and the other joined him, though rather hollowly, Carstairs thought.

"What about the gun?" Twysden asked. "What sort of pattern was it? Any idea at all?"

Carstairs seemed doubtful.

"A heavy make, I should imagine—something about the Service size, although it is difficult to judge, as I'm only going on the volume of the report."

Twysden looked doubtful for a moment, and studied the other's face before he spoke again.

"Now look here," he said eventually, "I'm going to make rather a curious request, but if you could comply it might mean a lot."

"Yes?"

"Well, it's this. I want you to keep your story to yourself. Don't tell a soul, and don't make a move in the matter—yet. I have good reasons for my request, which I'd rather not give you now. You haven't been to the police already?"

Carstairs shook his head.

"No—I haven't—yet," he added meaningfully.

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"Well, I want you to promise that you'll postpone your decision for a day or two."

He paused.

"And we'll make a bargain on it."

"Oh, yes, what's that?"

"If you'll hold your tongue, I'll guarantee to produce your would-be murderer. Give me two days."

Something seemed to be troubling Carstairs, but presently he looked up.

"Two days? Very well, we'll shake hands on it, and to-morrow, if you like, I'll take you out on the Cliffs and put you on the direct track. And now I think I'm about ready for bed."

He stretched up lazily.

The other rose with him and was, actually, the first to leave the room, for Carstairs had lingered behind to see the old proprietor.

"Dazzle back yet?" repeated that worthy in answer to his question. "No, sir, but he may return before the dawning. Don't you worry. Good night to 'e, sir."

Carstairs continued on up the dark stairs, sunk in his own thoughts, and presently he saw the gleam of a lamp pass into the room next his own. Twysden, then, was occupying the adjacent chamber.

He strode silently along the dim corridor

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and came to his own door. He opened it and passed stealthily through. The place was in pitch darkness, although at one point he suddenly saw the flash of a faint ray of light.

Before striking a match he walked questioningly across, and soon saw the explanation.

At one time or another the next room and the one he now stood in had been communicating, and the gleam of light was admitted through a fault in the edge of the ill-fitting door.

Pensively he moved across and lit the lamp. Then he lazily undressed. But some minutes later, just before he turned in between the lavender-scented sheets, the overwhelming desire came to him to spy into the next room.

He stretched over and extinguished the light, then crept across the room towards the crevice in the door through which a beam still poured, showing that the room next his own was still illuminated.

Furtively he bent down and looked through.

The further apartment was similar in shape and design to the one he was occupying, and at the small bureau, just in his line of vision, he saw a seated figure.

It was Twysden, and he was busily engaged in making a number of entries in a small pocket-book. Every now and then he would glance up meditatively and then return to his

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task as before. It seemed that this work was almost complete, for, as Carstairs looked, he wearily rose and crossed the room out of sight, and the watcher was about to retire, with a rather ashamed feeling, when a sudden sound caused him to peer again into the far room with intensified interest.

He could not see the man himself now, but a strong shadow, thrown by the bright lamp on to the far wall, showed an attenuated figure which Carstairs knew must be Twysden's. And this was not all, for the sudden noise which had come to the sailor's quick ears had been the snap of a metal catch, and he could distinctly see now that the man he had taken into his confidence so recently, was going through the motions of cleaning a gun—one which, from its shape and size, he judged to be—a large Service revolver.

CHAPTER X

IT was some time before Carstairs eventually retired for the night, but even then he lay awake hour after hour troubled by his coursing thoughts, reviewing the events of the previous day.

Uppermost in his mind came a vague suspicion of Twysden.

Had he done wrong in confiding in him? Was he really a friend? The bargain which they had both made he now looked on as being merely ludicrous, but what could have been the man's object in his insistence on silence?

As his mind wandered back over the past stirring hours, he found himself again amazed at the incredible speed with which events had moved.

Then there was Anne, the tragic little figure he had first seen in Danny's deserted cottage. He presumed that she had seen his car under the trees outside, but, then, why had she followed him in? It worried him, and then, quite suddenly, a new thought came to explain her action. It had been remarked on, and he had been the first to notice it himself, that the two cars, Twysden's and his own,

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were almost identical ; indistinguishable they would have been in the dim light of a winter dusk.

He knew that Anne had actually been following him, for had she not as good as admitted it by her silence ? Was it not more than likely, then, that she had pursued him into the cottage, having seen the car under the hedge outside, under the impression that inside she would meet someone different ? And who else but Twysden himself ?

Almost startled by the ease of this course of deduction, he let it run a stage further, and remembered a chance remark that the girl had let drop, only that evening, on the Cliffs —“ You are being mistaken for somebody else.” The words came back to him vividly now.

Mistaken for somebody else !

His mind took him back to the previous evening when he had stood beside that other car in the inn yard.

Was this also to prove another case of mistaken identity ? It was not inconceivable to suppose that he might have been wrongly taken for the owner of the newly-arrived Morris by the man with the scarred face.

And here was another pointer to Twysden.

The most significant fact which his reasoning had produced was the seeming possibility

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of some bond between the man and the girl with the club foot, yet the more he thought the more estranged from any satisfactory conclusion did he become. At length, reflecting that the morrow might possibly furnish some explanation for the gathering mystery, Carstairs turned over restlessly and eventually fell into a troubled sleep.

A series of loud knocks on his bedroom door awoke him next morning; he sat up with a start and glanced quickly at his watch.

It was barely half-past six, and the full light of day had not yet come. Running his fingers through his disordered hair, he called out irritably :

“ Hullo ! Who’s there ? ”

The words were hardly spoken before the door was flung open to admit a figure whom, even in the uncertain light of the passage outside, Carstairs immediately recognised as Sam Livesay.

“ Come in, Sam.”

But that worthy had already entered and now, closing the door hurriedly, rested his broad back against the panels.

He was breathless and, as Carstairs could see, strangely excited.

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Carstairs sat up with a start.

"Hullo! What the devil's up?" he demanded; but it was some moments before the old man spoke.

"It's Mr. Twysden," were his first words. "I'm afraid——"

"Well, go on."

"Mr. Twysden has gone."

"Gone?"

"Yes," continued Sam, in a helpless voice. "Gone, and quite suddenly. Somehow I couldn't help thinking of Mr. Denbigh. I feel proper shook up."

Carstairs slipped out of bed and hurriedly drew on a dressing-gown.

"Let's hear all about it," he said. "Who found that he'd disappeared in the first place?"

The old proprietor looked up.

"I did," he said.

Carstairs could see that he had a story to tell, and that he was holding something back.

"Now let's hear all about it."

Sam sank helplessly into a chair by the bedside.

"It's like this," he began, talking eagerly, and in a harsh whisper. "You remember last night I was telling you about that poor devil of a detective, Denbigh?"

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Carstairs nodded impatiently.

"Well, somehow I couldn't get the thought of him out of my head. I must have got to sleep round about one or two o'clock, I suppose, and some hours later I was awakened by a door banging somewhere. I didn't know how to account for the sound, for everything should have been locked up and secure; but the noise seemed to be coming from the yard."

"Just below here, you mean?" questioned the other.

Sam nodded. "Yes. My window looks out from the other side actually. You can just see it from yours, as a matter of fact. Where was I? Oh, yes. The banging door. Well, the long and the short of it was, I got up and looked out."

He paused hesitatingly.

"It was dark, but clear enough to see things fairly distinctly. I couldn't make out much at first, but presently I thought I saw somebody, or *something*, squirming down the wall just opposite."

Carstairs looked over at him doubtfully.

"Squirming down the wall? Are you certain?"

"Positive. It slid down the wall and slipped away out of the yard, through the side gate, the one that leads out into the

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fields. I watched, paralysed. And then, quite suddenly, I realised that the figure must have climbed from the window next to yours."

"What? Twysden's, you mean?"

Sam nodded again. "Yes, from Mr. Twysden's window, and I fancy it was the figure of a tallish man, dressed in black."

Carstairs scratched his unshaven chin.

"Perhaps it was Twysden himself," he muttered, but Sam Livesay shook his head.

"That was what I thought at first, but, then, why couldn't he have used the front door?"

"Lord knows." Carstairs allowed his thoughts to run on for a few moments, then he rose and walked over to the window. He flung the casement wide open and craned out. Twysden's window was swinging idly open, and by its side showed the dark line of a water-pipe.

He looked back into the room.

"It must have been Twysden you saw," he remarked. "There's a pipe which runs close beside his window. He could easily have swarmed down."

But Sam shook his head dismally.

"Maybe," he said.

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Carstairs turned and crossed over to the bed.

"Very well, go on. What happened next?"

Sam reflected for a moment, but presently continued:

"I slipped into a few clothes and then came round the corridor to this side of the house. Mr. Twysden's door was ajar. I knocked, but I needn't have troubled, for his room was empty."

"The bed——"

"Had not been slept in. Everything was spick and span. But one suit of clothes was gone, and his shooting-boots and water-proof were missing."

Carstairs got up resolutely.

"Let's have another look round in that room," he decided.

Sam Livesay approved of the idea strongly, and, scenting in the other a useful ally, immediately led the way into the passage.

Twysden's room had been, as he had said, left quite neatly. They looked around for a few minutes, but finally, after a short inspection, they came out, and the proprietor locked the door behind him and carried off the key.

"Perhaps he's gone out fishing and didn't

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want to disturb the house by unbolting the doors so early," suggested Carstairs, as Sam moved off.

But the other opposed the theory.

"I thought of that myself," he admitted, "but if you look down into the harbour you will see that Mr. Twysden's boat is still moored up."

The inn was just waking into activity when Carstairs returned to his room, where he flung himself wearily on his bed; but, after ten minutes' concentrated thought, he sat up again. Theorising was all very well in its way, but to probe the inner secrets of the mystery which was undoubtedly encircling him, called for more practical action. And somehow, at the moment, he felt sure that one clue at least could be found in the room which Twysden had left so suddenly and mysteriously.

With the decision that from thenceforward he would act as his own detective, Carstairs proceeded to put his first theory to the test.

It was true that Sam Livesay had locked the passage door, but there still remained the other—the communicating one—and it looked flimsy enough.

He stepped quickly over and studied the lock, and, to his surprise, found the key still in place. He stooped down and listened,

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but there was no sound. Then he snapped back the lock, opened the door, and slipped quickly through.

A shaft of faint sunlight fell across the floor, and the casement curtains were bellying to the faint morning breeze. The windows were still wide open, and through them crept wisps of damp sea-fog.

His first object of search was the bureau, and he tried drawer after drawer. They all opened readily enough save one. Presently he left it and tried the chest of drawers, and finally the tall wardrobe beside the door. But all to no purpose. The clothes still remained, it was true; an old battered hat, with the name of a good Piccadilly firm inside, still hung on the door. But there were no letters, no papers, and, what Carstairs thought more important, no trace of the little note-book with which Twysden had been so busily engaged on the previous night.

With the feeling of acting like an amateur pickpocket, he returned to the desk. It was a shabby, rather old-fashioned affair, with a high rack on one corner containing blank sheets of note-paper. Three shallow drawers lined the knee-hole on either side, and it was one of these—the bottom one on the left hand—which resisted all his efforts to open it.

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Resolutely he slipped back into his own room and returned with a broad-handled fishing-knife. He opened it, and inserted the thinnest blade just above the lock. Breathing a prayer, he gave a quick wrench and a pull. There followed a loud click, and the drawer was open.

So far, so good. But the result hardly rewarded the effort. He saw a folded heap of blotting-paper, a broken penholder, and a matchbox. It was disappointing; but, as he probed about in the back corners, his questing fingers found a small metallic object which he quickly withdrew and held up to the light.

It flashed dully in the glimmer of the wan winter sun, but Carstairs was sufficiently interested to drop the article into his side-pocket and hurriedly search through the drawer again. For the thing he had found was a spent cartridge-case, obviously from a revolver with a large bore.

CHAPTER XI

TIME was moving rapidly, for it had already struck seven as Carstairs stood at the open casement window with the brass cartridge-case between his fingers.

That it fitted Twysden's pistol he had no doubt, but, even as he stooped to investigate the drawer, his quick ears caught the sound of a light tread in the passage outside.

There was no time to be lost, and he was about to dart away when he happened to notice the smudge of some words on the blotting-paper he held in his hand—the paper that he was about to replace. Deciding to retain it, and with hardly a second to spare, he slipped back into his own room, and was hardly clear before he heard the sound of a key being inserted in the lock next door. Someone entered and, looking through the crack, Carstairs saw it to be Livesay.

He quickly dressed, and, by the light of his reading-lamp, endeavoured to make out the uncertain words on the paper spread out before him on the dressing-table. The ink-stains were new, and apparently the words

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had been the heading to some note. As far as he could judge, there were only three, but they had been practically dry before being blotted.

The last written word was the clearest, and was almost decipherable even in its reversed state. It obviously began with a capital letter and, when he held it up to the mirror, the word leapt out at him clearly :

“ Hampstead ”

The paper dropped from his nerveless fingers. Another memory of Anne had been stirred. Her reference to Hampstead Heath.

Perhaps the blotted words were an address.

With this new theory he snatched the sheet up, tried again, and presently found that the second word was “ House,” but, although the first still remained undecipherable, he could see that his surmise was correct.

*“ . . . House,
“ Hampstead.”*

Carstairs shook his head undecidedly. But he burnt the paper and ground the ashes to dust before he opened the door and descended to the coffee-room.

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Sam Livesay came down as he opened the morning paper, and Carstairs looked up sharply as he entered.

"I forgot to ask about the spaniel," he said.

Sam looked troubled.

"It's queer, for he hasn't shown up yet. But I have some news from the station."

He moved closer.

"It's from Mr. Twysden."

Carstairs threw his paper on to a side-table and glanced over at the other questioningly.

"Yes, a message has just come down to say that he has been called to London urgently, but may be back to-night."

"Can I see the note?"

Sam shook his head. "There isn't one," he said. "It came verbally."

"Who brought it, then? Anyone you know?"

The other looked doubtful.

"Well, it wasn't one of the villagers," he admitted. "But I seemed to recognise the voice. It was a man who brought the message, rather muffled up."

"Tall, with a scarred face?"

Sam Livesay smiled at the eager voice.

"No. On the short side, if anything."

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“ Oh ! ” breathed Carstairs, and there was a suspicion of relief in the exclamation.

“ Mr. Twysden must have left by the first train,” continued Sam. “ It draws out at about six on Wednesdays for the market at Melford.”

Carstairs turned to the misty windows and looked wearily through them into the yard. The other saw a wave of doubt flash over the forceful features, and immediately a cold hand seemed to clutch at his heart.

“ Good God, Mr. Carstairs ! ” he blurted out. “ You don’t think that perhaps Twysden never went by that train ? You don’t think he’s gone the same way as—as Mr. Denbigh, do you ? ”

Impulsively he gripped the other’s arm and swung him round to meet his troubled eyes.

But Carstairs shook him off with a shrug, and picked up his crumpled paper. With studied carelessness he turned up the centre pages.

“ I don’t know,” he ventured, after a hesitating pause.

He hurried over the meal which was served shortly after, for somehow he found Livesay’s troubled eyes disconcerting, and presently stepped out into the high road and glanced down towards the harbour.

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Sam had been correct, for he could see distinctly now, through the light mist banks, the hull of the moored launch which he knew was Twysden's.

He turned from the sea and, after a while, strolled slowly up the hill inland. He was actually walking directly towards the station, but before he came to the narrow cutting which led down towards the railway he paused at a wooden stile. It was the one he had climbed last night, on his return from the Cliffs. He had actually talked with Anne almost in the shadow of it.

He stood for a while irresolutely, with his arms resting on the top bar.

Which way ?

Then he decided that enquiries at the tiny station, however deeply conducted, would undoubtedly yield nothing. Twysden was not well known, and might easily have escaped observation had he boarded the crowded market train. Yet the question of his sudden departure called for some consideration.

It had not been flight—of that Carstairs was convinced ; but his normal, rather phlegmatic imagination, failed to produce anything as a satisfactory alternative.

The sudden thought of abduction had

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undoubtedly struck him, as Sam Livesay had guessed, but somehow he failed in bringing himself to think that Twysden had gone the same way as that mysterious figure, Denbigh. The very idea he found repulsive, and he rejected it on those grounds alone.

Denbigh ! How the man's name recurred.

The cool, damp, sea breeze whipped about his ankles as he stood conjuring up pictures of the man whom he had never seen, smiling grimly when he recollected Sam's conviction that he had been a detective. How some people's imagination ran on, spinning webs about prosaic characters, whose wildest adventure would probably prove to have been a flutter at a race-meeting !

However, disappearance, particularly in these modern days of telephone and wireless, is no common affair, and, if Livesay was to be believed, the man had been missing for about five months. But perhaps he was abroad, perhaps——

Carstairs mounted the stile and dropped lightly on the far side. A trudge over the Cliffs might clear his brain. Besides, there was his discarded gun to recover.

He strode forward.

Presently he came to a swell of moorland, which fell away into the vale of a narrow

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cutting ; a mile away, through the trees, he saw the smoke of a train.

It was an eerie spot on these cliffs, for every now and then would come the harsh call of the soaring gulls. It was a plaintive note, and as he walked Carstairs recalled a legend, well known in the Service, that sea birds are the reincarnation of the lost souls of sailors—souls which drift and find expression in the feathered hosts of the ocean. He smiled again.

Ridiculous, of course !

The clusters of broom were heavy with moisture, and, after a while, on the higher ground again, he caught a glimpse of the House on the headland. But this morning there appeared a faint plume of smoke at one of the tall, twisted chimneys.

Carstairs fell to poking about among the brushwood, and presently saw the faint gleam of a steel barrel. The gun was lying under a tangled brake of undergrowth, and was almost hidden from view. Through the trigger-guard ran a stout twig shooting from off the low-growing shrubs, and it was this which had impeded its use on the previous evening.

He released it and, as he stooped to pick up the fallen sling, his eyes happened to

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look along the level of the ground, under the gorse-bushes—and of a sudden his heart missed a beat, and a cold sweat burst out on his forehead.

For he had seen something—awful.

A something which made him start back, with ashen lips and a face gone suddenly pale.

He gazed down, with his eyes filled with surprise and his face with terror.

Almost to his feet was extended a human hand, shrivelled into the semblance of a terror-striking claw. The skin was livid and tight-drawn, as if the very bones sought to burst their covering.

But there was worse yet, for the hand was attached to the trunk of a dead man's body, and, as Carstairs drew aside the lower branches, he found it—the withered remains of a man with twisted features and hollow, staring eye-sockets, whose bloodless lips had long since receded from the discoloured teeth.

With a shrinking cry, he started back yet again. For the first time in his life Carstairs had sensed the true repugnance and awe of death.

He stood motionless and appalled, gazing down on this withered corpse, which had once been a man, and suddenly, even as he

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wavered, felt the brush of a body against his sleeve and the clutch of fevered fingers on his arm. Paralysed into inaction as he momentarily was, he mastered himself with an effort and swung round to meet this fresh terror.

CHAPTER XII

THE church clock, somewhere down in the heart of the village, was just chiming out the hour of six as a tall figure, dressed in a long clinging ulster and a felt hat of a dark shade, strode down the surge of moorland around Brenport station and bought a ticket for London.

It was barely light as yet, but the small station was nearly half filled with a motley crowd of seaport farmers, all discussing the weekly prices.

The engine, which had just drawn out of the narrow siding, was on the point of steaming off as Twysden stepped out of the shadows around the waiting-room and, selecting a third-class carriage with a smoke-laden atmosphere, took his seat.

With a shrill whistle the train jolted out and, presently, they were running between banks of yellow gorse and beside a rushing stream, which joined issue with a second and went tumbling down to the sea. They passed fields white with hoar frost, and bare, leafless trees bowing slowly to the light

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morning air. They came to the desolate little stations of villages up to now untouched by the iron hand of civilisation, but which to-day disgorged a selection of produce for sale at the inland junction.

After tedious lingerings and delays the slow train drew into the city of Melford, where Twysden alighted, hardly distinguishable from the surging crowd of market-goers who had been his travelling-companions.

He still had some minutes to wait before the London train steamed in, and proceeded to spend them in inspecting the members of the crowd on the platform beside him.

By and by he was left more alone and, although there was one man who still remained, whom he did not like the look of, this other passed him and took up his stand some distance away, without, apparently, glancing in his direction.

But presently Twysden was in the London train, moving swiftly and easily south and westward.

As the time quickly passed he occupied himself with re-reading the entries in a small leather-bound note-book, but, when the train eventually drew into the main line terminus, he closed it with a snap and looked warily about him.

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He breakfasted at the station hotel and finally, passing out into the raw air of the London streets, walked slowly down towards the river. At Cannon Street he hailed a taxi, and some minutes later was seated in the superintendent's office at New Scotland Yard.

"Well?" asked Blayre, as the other selected a cigarette from the open box on the table before him and lazily lit it.

But Twysden sank back in a haze of blue tobacco-smoke before he made his report.

"Well," he echoed eventually, "we're on the right track this time—of that I'm positive. Only the devil of it is there's somebody else who's been let into the business as well."

Blayre looked up irritably.

"I don't understand."

Twysden nodded.

"Then I'd better start at the beginning. Are you ready? I motored down to Brenport on the fifteenth, as you suggested—that's the day before yesterday now—and arrived in at about eleven that night. I'd cooked up the usual yarn of fishing, of course, and I think I told you that I hired a boat last time I went down?"

The superintendent nodded quickly, and glanced at the small desk clock.

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Twysden noted the action, and laughed.

"I shall be ten minutes," he smiled, "at least. So don't say I didn't warn you."

But presently his face assumed a more serious expression, and he continued :

"I must have missed Blake and his girl on the road, for I saw nothing of them on the first day ; but I had hardly put my nose inside the inn—the Red Lion—before I met, or rather saw, two strangers. I took good care that I kept in the shadows, for I found them 'curiously interesting.'"

Mr. Blayre moved in his chair impatiently.

"One was the 'somebody else' I have referred to already, and the other was a man with a scarred face !"

"Mac ?" The superintendent snapped out the name.

Twysden inclined his head.

"Yes, or so at least I suspect at present, but what he's doing down there, so far from the London headquarters, I don't know."

He shrugged his shoulders and then again picked up the train of his report.

"On the second day I found that the ship had arrived, as I expected. She was lying well out to sea and around the coast off Fisherman's Cove, which I've mentioned to you

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before. I took out the boat to make certain, and there she still lies. But I must be quick; my ten minutes are drawing to an end."

The superintendent laughed.

"Your own suggestion entirely. Take twenty if you like, but make it short and snappy."

"Right. I'll skip on till the evening then. At supper I met Carstairs."

"Who the devil is he?" interrupted Blayre.

"The man I was telling you about—the one I mentioned having seen on the previous night. Carstairs, his name is; he's a naval officer."

"Have you checked that?"

Twysden looked up with a troubled face. "No, I haven't had much of a chance."

Blayre immediately turned up the pages of a *Quarterly Navy List*, and ran his finger down the alphabetical column.

Presently he paused.

"Ah, here we are! Carstairs, R., Lieutenant . . . seniority . . . h'm. That's our man, I expect. Sounds genuine enough. Go on."

"Well, he gave me a bit of a scare to begin with," admitted Twysden, "for it appeared that this fellow had been shot at."

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He paused and looked across at the other sharply.

"Shot at, I am convinced, in mistake for me. He had apparently gone out on the Cliffs—rather a wild, rugged part around Brenport—alone, and had been attacked by a masked man. It's a horrible business, and I can't help thinking it must have been that way that they got Denbigh."

"The man on the job before, you mean?" demanded Blayre.

"Yes."

"Then you're still convinced that he's dead?"

Twysden nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid I am. At least, he's dead to the force; he's been missing five months now."

And the superintendent was compelled to admit the fact.

Twysden settled back in his chair and searched the ceiling for inspiration.

"That, then, is about the limit of my report up to the present, but there's still a little more to come. In the first place, I have met Blake. I saw him again for a moment this morning, and sent a message down to the inn about my queer departure."

The superintendent looked across at him enquiringly.

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"It was the attack on Carstairs that decided that step," Twysden explained, "for by now I'm convinced they've spotted that he is not their true opponent. Incidentally, things are moving pretty rapidly up here in London. I felt I had to come up, if only to warn you. Blake has got the London address—here it is. I made a copy of it last night."

Blayre took up the written note.

"'Grove House, Hampstead,'" he read out.

Then he turned to the other.

"You've done excellently, Twysden."

But the other shook his head. "That's Blake's job," he said, "and he's coming up to Hampstead for the raid. I fancy you said it could be timed for about five. I rather think I should like to be there. And will you arrange about the local orders for the *coup* at Brenport?"

The superintendent nodded.

"Yes." He referred to some notes. "You should have the men at about midnight. Preferably a little later. Is that all?"

Twysden reflected.

"Yes, I think so. Carstairs ought to be unmolested now. They've already turned their attention to me, for I'm certain I was followed up to London to-day. There was a man at Melford Junction that I think I've

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seen before. However, I'm forewarned and fore-armed."

He patted his side-pocket suggestively.

Presently Blayre asked a question.

"What form does this organisation take? Any idea?"

Twysden thought rapidly.

"Yes, I think I can make a pretty fair guess. In the first place, there's the London headquarters. The haunted place at Hampstead—Grove House. There's a dépôt in Brenport itself, and another at the Summer Hotel down there—or so, at least, I think. We shall prove that to-night. The nucleus is in London. The coastal communication is by car, and from the shore to the ship——"

He spread out his hands helplessly.

"The Lord only knows—so far."

Blayre looked at him sharply.

"You seem to have a remarkably clear grip of the situation," he snapped.

Twysden smiled grimly.

"So I ought. I've concentrated on the job since September. All the same, I flatter myself that, with the possible exception of Blake, I know more about it than anybody in England."

The superintendent looked annoyed.

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"I don't like the idea of this outside man, Blake," he admitted.

But Twysden laughed down his objections.

"Why, he's done marvels," he said. "And if it hadn't been for his little girl, Anne, we shouldn't have the Hampstead address. It was through her alone that we picked up the trail of Mac where he had dropped it after leaving Wandsworth, and it was she who tracked him to Grove House. I gathered from Blake that she actually spied on them while they were at work."

Blayre whistled.

"The devil she did! Then full marks to her."

He paused.

"But now, how about you? What are your immediate plans? I take it that you won't be going back to Brenport till later."

Twysden considered, and then, just as he was about to arrive at some determination, there came a sudden knock at the door.

It opened, to admit a messenger carrying a telegram.

It was addressed to Twysden and, as he breathlessly tore it open, an intense silence reigned in the office, a silence which was presently broken by a choking exclamation from the recipient.

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Without a word he passed the message to Blayre, who read the sentences out in a husky whisper. It had been despatched from Brenport, and was signed "Blake":

"Come immediately. Serious developments. Denbigh has been found."

There followed a stilly pause, and then the superintendent rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Good God, Twysden, what does this mean?" he demanded.

The other looked over at him quickly.

"It means that I leave London for the east coast at once," he said in a calm voice.

He walked quickly to the door, and then turned with his hand on the post by his side.

"Wish me good luck," he said.

For a moment he lingered; then the door slammed to behind him.

Some moments after he had left, Colonel Burton, the Assistant Commissioner, came up the stairs and spoke with the superintendent for a few minutes.

"Was that Twysden who has just gone out?" he enquired.

Mr. Blayre nodded.

"He's just left my office and is returning

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to Brenport. He's working on the east coast mystery, and we've just received some news of Denbigh. You remember——"

The discussion sank into an exchange of confidences.

But some minutes later Colonel Burton left the office, and the superintendent's eyes followed him as he walked slowly away, for he could see that his senior's mind was concerned with the mystery of Twysden's movements.

It was true that the young detective' had recently returned from America, and had been out of touch with the Yard for some time. But could it have been a shade of suspicion, some doubt of the young man's integrity, which had clouded the Commissioner's brow?

Presently the superintendent sat forward and cleared the subject from his mind. He rang the bell and reached for a pile of papers from a basket close at hand.

CHAPTER XIII

THE lamps were being lit at Melford Station when the main-line train pulled in that evening. Only a handful of passengers alighted, and it was merely a single figure who presently walked across to the Brenport side, where the fussy little engine was waiting.

Twysden referred to his watch and found that it was barely five. The London raid ought to be through in a few minutes, and then Blake would be returning to the coast. In a fast car he ought to be able to do it in a few hours, or so Twysden hoped, for they were due to meet again at about eight. But he shook his head gravely as he took his seat. They were running it a shade fine.

A clinging sea fog rolled up to meet them as the train neared the coast, and the air was close and heavy by the time the little terminus was reached. A shimmer of lightning, reflected on the threatening clouds to the southward, indicated the possibility of a storm coming down on the evening breeze.

Twysden drew his coat tightly around

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him as he walked out into the gathering shadows under the clump of trees which fringed the station road, and glanced apprehensively about as he set his face towards the village.

He walked swiftly, and almost noiselessly, pausing suddenly on occasion to probe with keen anxious eyes the uncertain shades which enshrouded him.

Suddenly, through the hushed evening silence, cut a low growling rumble. Twysden stopped for a moment in his stride and let the resonant echoes die away before he continued. The deep reverberation had barely ceased before the sounds were renewed by the deep baying of a hound.

The main road soon opened out before him ; dimly in front were the dark outbuildings of some farm ; beyond loomed the tower of the old church, and then suddenly, out of the patch of darkness almost by his side, there moved a tall figure.

Twysden came to a standstill, and instinctively his hand flashed to his side pocket, just as a soft laugh rang out.

"Not so quick on it, partner," drawled a low voice.

Twysden gave vent to a sudden exclamation, in which there sounded a tone of relief,

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for the man who had come to him out of the shadows was the naval officer, Carstairs.

"Gee, you gave me a bit of a turn," admitted Twysden as the other stepped up.

"Sorry. But you shouldn't be so unconventional yourself. I've been waiting a full hour on the chance of seeing you soon."

They walked together into the side of the road, and leaned against the narrow stile which gave on to the cliff path.

"You've just come back by the London train, haven't you?" enquired Carstairs.

They had stood for a moment in silence, a silence which he had been the first to break.

Twysden nodded absently in the dim light. "Yes," he admitted, and then quickly added, as if desirous of avoiding any form of explanation: "What have you been doing with yourself?"

The other thrust his hands deep into his side pockets and glanced away over the cliffs seaward.

"I've had rather a busy day. As a matter of fact, I've just left the police station."

He felt the other start.

"Police station!" echoed Twysden, with a quick intake of breath.

"Yes. I've been giving evidence."

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There was a short pause, and he sensed that the other was eyeing him keenly.

"I mentioned nothing about yesterday's affairs, but to-day—well to-day has been rather different. You see, it started off with my finding a dead body."

"Denbigh! By heaven, then did you——"

"Yes, you see it was I who found him—it—first. I was poking around in the bushes looking for my gun, somewhere over there"—he waved his hand vaguely to the westward—"and—and there he was," he continued weakly. "But while I was standing about, another man came on the scene and, thank God! took up the case from me. His name was Blake, I gathered at the station."

Twysden whistled softly.

"I see it all," he murmured. "How ghastly!"

"Yes, it gave me a proper shake-up. I was beginning to think that the present civilisation, changed and sickened as it is by the war, had made us callous of taking life and meeting death. But to-day I find I'm mistaken. If ever there was foul murder done, then I have seen its victim in the past few hours." He shuddered involuntarily. "He looked awful."

The other nodded sympathetically.

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" I understand," he said, and then hesitated. " How was it done ? "

" He'd been shot in the body." He considered : " By an expanding bullet, I should say. And, judging by the contortions he had writhed into, I should say that death had not come quite instantaneously."

" You appal me, Carstairs," murmured the other, and there was a quiver in the low voice.

Carstairs laughed mirthlessly.

" Not half so much as I have been myself," he replied. " Would you like to see the murdered man ? "

" Yes, but first I must see the place where you found him. Do you think you could find it again ? "

" Why sure, this way." He vaulted over the stile and the other followed.

They strode on for some time in silence.

" You haven't told me yet what you've been doing yourself," grumbled Carstairs, after they had covered the first mile.

" I know," assented Twysden. " But that will keep. Straight on, did you say ? "

They had just cleared a dark clump of trees, and before them saw the rise of a low mound.

Carstairs nodded. " Keep to the left side."

They moved on slowly up.

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"Stop. It was just about here, under these bushes. You'll have to get down on hands and knees to see the place."

Twysden stooped, and subjected the ground and the surrounding gorse to a brief scrutiny.

Finally he straightened up and looked uneasily about him.

"I don't like it," he decided. "There seems to be something rather too uncanny about meeting death in the open." He pushed his hat back from his forehead and brushed his hand across his eyes. Presently he said :

"Do you think he was shot from close quarters? "

Carstairs shook his head.

"No, I don't think he was. It was impossible to judge exactly, but somehow I felt convinced that he was fired at from a great distance, and that it was a premeditated attack. The character of the wound led me to believe that the bullet had come from a long way off, but"—he hesitated—"it was impossible to make sure. You see, decomposition was in its advanced stages already."

Twysden shuddered in the half light.

"Well, I think I'll be getting along to the police station. Which is the quickest way back, I wonder? "

Carstairs considered.

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"Why, the way we came, undoubtedly, I should say. How else were you proposing to go?"

"By the shore road," was the answer.

There followed a short pause. A series of doubts and fancies were racing through Carstairs' active brain, and uppermost came the warning not to let the other out of his sight. That Twysden was armed he had guessed, and he meant from then onwards to keep a keen eye on this plausible chance companion of his.

"Good idea! Then I'll come with you," he decided eventually, and, after a while, the two men moved off together.

They walked on in silence for a few minutes, for each seemed sunk in his own thoughts, but presently they came to a narrow lane with high moss-grown banks. The passage was a veritable channel of darkness, and necessitated their further progress being continued in single file.

Carstairs, who excused his action by saying that he was not familiar with the road, fell into step behind. After a short walk the sound of the surf grew noticeably stronger, and suddenly they turned a corner and began picking their way over the wind-swept rocks in a haze of driven spray.

The conversation, desultory as it had been

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before, was forcibly abandoned ; for it took all their skill and attention to keep to the rugged path and make appreciable progress.

They were walking slowly, and Carstairs was already regretting his decision of joining Twysden in his walk, or even of approving of the suggestion in the first place, when his attention was drawn by a sudden shout from in front.

He stopped and peered warily about. He could just see the vague form of his companion through the driving sea fog, but presently he saw something more.

Twysden was pointing on before him with an agitated hand. The road in front was overswept by waves, and, even as they looked, a great comber rushed in and burst into a wall of flying spray.

The twinkling lights of the harbour they knew could not be many miles round the headland which faced them, but they now stood in a narrow rock-strewn cove, and the point they had rounded some minutes before was blank and wave-lapped too.

They looked uneasily at one another, for each realised that they were trapped.

Carstairs choked back an oath.

"We're done," shouted Twysden, above the roar of the surf.

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He looked hurriedly round at the overhanging cliffs.

"We shall have to climb if we're going to get clear."

The other glanced over the sands at the incoming tide.

"Perhaps we can still work back," he cried. "I'll run over and have another look. Wait for me."

He turned immediately, and went scrambling along the way they had come.

The rocks were spray-driven and slippery, but presently he reached the turn of the road.

One glimpse was sufficient. They were hopelessly cut off.

He turned again and made his way back, and at one place he paused and his eyes roved up the face of the cliffs in an attempt to find a possible path on them.

As he looked, the mist banks rolled aside for an instant, and above him, on the distant headland, he fancied he saw the dim outline of a house.

Again he glimpsed white discoloured walls, the dark shades of windows, and the blur of twisted chimneys, but as suddenly the view was again screened, and there descended the storm-wrack pall.

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Hurriedly he scrambled on, with a curse on the treachery of the tides in Fisherman's Cove, and arrived back only to find that the ledge, where he had left his companion in misfortune, was deserted and bare.

CHAPTER XIV

I

ON the cliff edge above Fisherman's Cove stood a summer hotel. In winter it was deserted, the lawns went to ruin, and weeds ran riot in the rose-garden.

The house, with discoloured white walls, stood on a lonely stretch of coast, and the shutters, of wood, shut off the windows behind from the cutting winds, which scurried across the North Sea at almost all periods of the winter months.

From October to sometimes advanced May, the hotel was left absolutely untenanted. No caretaker, apparently, was considered necessary ; for the countryside was barren, and the outlook, at this time of the year at any rate, pretty desolate.

A few stunted creepers swathed the grey walls on the inland side with dry, twisted tendrils, but towards the sea nothing would grow, and the walls stared blindly out to the east with sightless shuttered eyes.

No path led down the cliff face—no main

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road ran up to the untended pathetic little drive, but a coach met the train at Brenport, over five miles away, and conveyed the would-be guests.

The attractions were few, even during the temperate months, yet the air was bracing, and there was excellent opportunity for rough walking on the cliffs surrounding the hotel.

The building stood on a headland, and to the southward lay Fisherman's Cove. But it was very desolate. When the wind sprang up and the great waves came crashing in on the rocks below, little was to be heard but the thunder of the raging waters, and the cry of the sheering gull.

2

"Twysden!" A shout, tossed and buffeted by the rising wind, came volleying across the cliff face. It awoke the mocking echoes, and, through the silence which followed, there came the queer beat of wings from some creature of the night.

It was almost dark now—but little enough sun had been seen all that day, and the shadows were deceptive.

Ominous clouds overshadowed the sea and brought with them the promise of heavy rain.

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Carstairs waited, but there was no answer.

“ Twysden ! ” came the cry again.

Crouching in a narrow alcove, and sheltered from the wind, which was rising to half-gale force every minute, stood Carstairs, a broad-shouldered, muscular-looking figure, with outstretched hand, steadying himself against the shock of the elements. He had been shouting on occasions, but was on the point of giving the idea up as being hopeless. Twysden had disappeared utterly. No sound nor sign came to Carstairs as he waited. Obviously the other must have climbed, but it seemed odd that he had not remained on the rock path.

Suddenly, across the dark space, came a faint :

“ Hullo ! ” and the listening figure straightened up.

“ Thank God ! ” he said vehemently, and with equivalent feeling, for the answering voice he had recognised as belonging to Twysden. Then followed a scramble to the left, then another ear-piercing call. It was a difficult task. As he climbed he dislodged stones which went thundering down to the sea a hundred feet below. But five minutes' really hard work brought a blurred figure into sight.

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"Hullo! Hurt, old man?"

For he saw now that the other figure was indeed Twysden.

"No—not yet."

"Well, that was a fine game," gasped his companion, as he came slithering up. "But where in the name of thunder did you get to? You gave me the very dickens of a scare. For a moment I feared you might have been swept off the rocks. I wonder how we missed one another."

"H'm," was the answer. "*I* might just as well have asked that. I lost sight of you in the very first minute, in that belt of fog—when you left I couldn't see a thing, and as the tide came in I retreated up the cliff side a bit."

"Yes," laughed Carstairs softly, "you're quite right. It's getting as thick as soup, and I suppose we're both to blame."

"Oh, I don't know, it's my fault for suggesting this show in the first place. I really don't see how we could have known about that sudden turning in the tide this evening. It must have been on the change as we came into Fisherman's Cove."

His companion blushed in the semi-darkness. Somehow he felt himself vaguely responsible and, candidly, it annoyed him, for

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the present occurrence he took as a slur on his prestige and he said as much.

The other laughed shortly.

"Well, standing here jawing our heads off won't get us out of this fix anyhow," he decided, glancing up the cliff face. "Let's move on, George."

Lieutenant Carstairs, Royal Navy, whose Christian name, as already indicated, did not happen to be "George," showed his readiness to continue by setting action to the word. For several minutes nothing was heard save the rattling of dislodged stones and, on occasion, a smothered oath.

There was no beaten track, no continued path, and as they advanced, they found the necessity for more than usual ingenuity to avoid the overhanging crags, and keep in communication with one another.

"Hard work, Twysden!"

Timothy Twysden straightened his back for an instant, thereby nearly losing his small supply of stable equilibrium; then, speechless, he climbed on once more.

Presently they left the rocks and came to a steep track of short and stunted grass land.

They were nearly at the top.

Five minutes later found them standing at the summit, breathless and exhausted.

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The darkness was now intense, and as a chill scurry of wind beat upon their faces, Carstairs in his light coat shivered involuntarily.

He looked down. At the foot of the cliff, below the belt of swirling sea fog, boomed the great waves as they came crashing in on to the scattered rocks. The high sea was the aftermath of the wild weather of the previous week. They paused and, as they listened, there came the cry of the sheering gull.

"That's funny," said Carstairs, "never remember hearing a night bird with a call like that."

His voice was eager, and the tone denoted concern.

"Oh, dry up, you old ornithologist," muttered Twysden. "Let's think about something more important—ourselves, for instance. I suppose I shall have to postpone my visit to the police station, but come along, that looks like a house over there."

To the other, the sudden bird cry had suggested some form of signal in its unnatural note, but he followed up the line indicated.

At length: "Yes," he said, "it does look like something. I think I spotted it just now by the beach as a matter of fact. Fairly interesting—and, by Jove! there's a light. Perhaps that means supper."

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A reference to his watch had reminded him that it was already late, and that a meal of any sort would be acceptable.

The ejaculation caused Twysden to turn his attention from a momentary glance seawards.

Presently : " I don't see any light," he said.

Carstairs glanced back, blinked, and looked again.

The contradiction had annoyed him, but the ejaculation was astonishing in its accuracy. Before him, even more distinctly now, he could see the shadowy pile of the house. But——

" Well, that's rum," he continued. " I could have sworn——"

" Then don't," cut in Twysden drily. " We had plenty of that coming up the cliff. It's quite possible that somebody has pulled down the blind or closed the shutters or——" He did not continue, but automatically brought the conversation to a close by moving on.

" Anyhow, let's have a look at it," he said a minute later. Although after a few paces he turned back quickly.

" Where did you think you saw the light ? " he asked.

The other considered. " In one of the

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first-floor windows, I should say. It appeared to move across the pane, just as if it had been carried by somebody coming downstairs."

Twysden nodded and then walked quickly forward, with Carstairs trailing along behind ; and as they approached he saw that the majority of the casements were shuttered. Presently their progress was impeded by a low brick wall, heavily overgrown with ivy, and in many places pierced by jagged fissures and generally out of repair. No gate was in evidence. They stepped through one of the broken gaps together and found themselves in a kitchen garden, rank with weeds, and fringed with low bushes dripping with moisture, which rustled mysteriously in the shadows at their side. From this vantage point they studied the building.

For some minutes they stood motionless, and Carstairs took the opportunity of examining the face of his companion. He saw the strong features knit into an expression of concern not unmingled with expectancy.

Then he turned his attention to the House, and the result of the brief examination wrung from him the next remark.

"That's queer," he said. "I believe it's empty."

"So it is," was the immediate reply.

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Carstairs glanced round at him quickly again.

“ Well, then, how do you explain the light ? ” he demanded.

There was a short, hesitating pause, then :

“ I can’t,” said Twysden. “ That’s why I intend having a look inside.

CHAPTER XV

"STEADY on! You're making enough noise to raise the dead."

The words were spoken in an anxious whisper.

Carstairs and Twysden were standing outside one of the French windows on the ground floor, and the former was levering away at the frame with a piece of hoop iron picked up in the yard.

It was the only convenient one which was unshuttered, and this had decided their action.

The pair had made a furtive and yet pretty thorough examination of the place from the exterior, even of the stables and outbuildings, and both of them had come to the conclusion, pretty rapidly, that the house was deserted. No homely light gleamed at any one of the dark windows and, though they had waited and listened, no sound came to them from the stilly depths. Carstairs, with his visions of supper floating off in the dim distance, had suggested ringing the bell, but Twysden had vigorously

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protested and Carstairs had wondered why, and shivered again as he looked up at the forbidding walls.

It seemed a veritable house of the dead.

It was Twysden who had remarked that the place looked like a summer hotel closed for the winter months.

Carstairs had reserved his opinion, although presently he recalled something he had heard, many years ago, during his last stay in fact.

Now he came to think over what he had been told, he remembered some mention of the new hotel, a converted mansion, which had then but recently come into being.

Twysden was attacking the window now, and with a skill which went to prove that he was as conversant with the art of opening windows from the outside as from within; and, as he stood there, it seemed strange to Carstairs that he had only met him two days ago at that homely little hotel at Brenport, and almost unaccountable the way that they had been drawn together. For acquaintance had undoubtedly ripened into friendship even in the first hour.

He waited, and, to occupy his time, he strolled over to the wall and peered out to sea. Away over the water he saw a blurred gleam which might have come from the lantern of a ship's riding light.

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He stood there vaguely interested, when suddenly there came a low call from the other.

"Come on," said Twysden.

The window was open, and swung darkly inwards before them. Carstairs turned to go to him, but, as he stepped quickly across the uneven surface of the side-walk, his foot caught in a soft body under the shadow of some long grasses.

He felt down wonderingly, and then whispered excitedly to Twysden. Suddenly a thin pencil of light flashed out, and Carstairs saw that he had produced a small pocket-torch.

"This way."

The other stepped across and joined him.

"What's the trouble?"

Then he directed the ray from his torch on to the ground, and whistled softly, while Carstairs stooped and closely examined the dark object at their feet.

Presently he straightened up.

"It's Dazzle all right," he decided. "Shot through the head, poor old chap. There's Livesay's collar still round his neck, with the address 'Red Lion Inn.' Damned mysterious how the dog came to find his way right out here."

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But Twysden dissented.

"I'd rather expected this," he admitted, "and my explanation is that he followed the man who attacked you, and was led here in consequence."

Carstairs started back with a sudden exclamation.

"By Jingo! P'raps you're right. But, on the other hand, if you're hinting also that the man who took a pot shot at me is hanging around behind the shutters of that house, I can't call you exactly reassuring."

Twysden laughed drily.

"We shall be as safe as the Bank of England, providing we keep together. Besides, we can't go on in this."

Rain was beginning to fall heavily.

But Carstairs cut in on him.

"No, I'll see you in Hades first. I'm for home; there's no point in entering that house. Besides, it's too dangerous."

Twysden laughed again, rather sardonically.

"Well, if you've already decided, we'd better part, though you'll get soaked before you've gone ten yards."

He hesitated.

"As for the danger, I'm prepared to risk it."

He turned as if to enter the house alone, and immediately Carstairs was at his side.

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"One moment, Bo," he smiled; "I was only hauling your leg. I'm for it, so lead on."

They turned and, as they did so, he could feel Twysden eyeing him queerly.

"Then you'd better tread light," came his whispered command from the darkness.

They moved forward.

A sudden flash of lightning and a crash of thunder heralded their entry into the "House of Darkness."

"Not much here," said Twysden a few minutes later. He had crossed the room by now, and had subjected it to a pretty thorough inspection by the light of the torch. Carstairs still lingered by the window, with the emotions of an amateur burglar, but he followed the movements of the other minutely, and borrowed from him a certain amount of assurance.

The door, he noticed, yawned wide, and showed the house, pitch dark, beyond. The torch was hardly powerful enough to show up the details of the hall outside, but to Carstairs it looked bare and unfurnished, although as he listened he fancied he heard the loud tickings of a clock in some distant room. Feeling that he must have been mistaken, his attention was presently drawn to the other by a whispered command.

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"Shut the windows and draw the blinds, if you please," ordered Twysden, walking towards the door.

Ever since their forced entrance he had assumed the lead, and Carstairs, more from the point of view of keeping the peace than anything else, had obeyed. The air of melodrama was beginning to amuse him. He closed the windows, but he found it impossible to draw the blinds. There did not happen to be any. He saw the dim outline of a rail, but there was nothing besides.

When he turned to the room again, Twysden had extinguished the torch, and Carstairs guessed that the door was now closed, but as he listened he almost imagined he heard the faint click of the lock.

"Let's have a glim, Twysden," growled Carstairs.

There was no answer.

"Here, what about that torch, Tim?"

He waited impatiently, but there came no return to his query. Dead silence, except for the drums of heaven which rolled over the sea to the eastward.

Carstairs murmured an ejaculation that sounded remarkably like an oath. Then he stepped across the room in the direction he imagined the door might be—a faint glimmer

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of lightning had recently shown him his bearings. But somehow he failed to find it, and his hands fumbled along the wall. Presently they encountered something. And he came near to shouting with relief, for it was an electric switch—one of a group of four. Doubting the possibility of a continued supply to a house in this deserted state, he felt for the topmost one and snapped it on.

And of a sudden the room was bathed in a glaring light.

The first thing he noticed was that the door was closed, but then :

“ Good God ! ” he choked. “ What’s this ? ”

He stepped back a pace.

And perhaps the movement was justified, for he had seen the wall was lined with ghostly figures—irregular white draped forms—and as he waited, he noticed that one of them was moving. Then he came near to laughing at his own discomfiture, when a hoarse voice suddenly said :

“ For God’s sake stop fooling about, and switch off that light.”

Carstairs, with a variety of emotions coursing through his active brain, again manipulated the switch, and the darkness came swooping down once more.

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At the back of one of the ghosts shone the glimmer of a light. Twysden reappeared from behind a hat-rack, which had been covered with a dust-sheet.

He switched out the torch and came stumbling across the floor.

"You've damn nearly ruined clue number one," he expostulated.

Carstairs was annoyed now.

"What the devil do you mean by 'clues'?" he snapped irritably.

There came a hollow laugh from the darkness by his side.

"You'll see in a minute, perhaps," was the rejoinder.

CHAPTER XVI

"LET'S draw the blinds, anyway," muttered Twysden a second later.

"You can't," said Carstairs, "for the very simple reason that there don't happen to be any."

The other glanced round and saw that what he had said was true.

"Oh, very well, we'll have to rig up something."

He stepped over to the far wall and, between them, they stripped off a couple of dust-sheets, which disclosed a long, low sideboard and a hat-rack, this latter presumably placed here to be out of the way from the hall. The sheets they rove over the curtain-rail, and secured them there temporarily with string.

"Now let's have a drop of light," said the sailor as he impatiently stepped across and snapped them on again.

This action seemed to afford some kind of relief to Carstairs, but when he turned to Twysden he found him closely examining the

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sides of the window-frames, and presently saw him shake his head.

He crossed swiftly to his side.

“What’s the trouble now?” he enquired, searching the other’s face with anxious eyes.

But Twysden failed to answer him for some moments.

Then Carstairs looked down and saw that the shutters had been folded back and rested in their normal closed position. The significance of this fact failed to strike him.

“Well, what’s the trouble?” he repeated.

Twysden shrugged his shoulders.

“I don’t know if we’ve found any—yet,” he answered eventually. “But you remember the inference I drew from finding Dazzle’s body, and also possibly from the light you saw?”

Carstairs nodded.

“You mean about this place not being as deserted as it seems?”

“Yes, and it has struck me that if anyone extraordinarily keen on evading the law was here, he wouldn’t leave his hiding-place so ineffectually guarded as to omit the closing of a shutter. Particularly when it happens

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to be on the first floor, and in a perfect state of repair."

"Then you think——"

"I don't quite know, but there are two possible explanations. One is that he isn't here at all, and the other——"

He paused doubtfully.

"And the other is that we're being led into a trap."

Carstairs laughed softly.

"Rot," he said. "You're getting jumpy. I——"

Suddenly he hesitated, and listened intently, head on one side.

"Whe-e-w! Did you hear that?"

"What?" snapped Twysden eagerly.

Carstairs hesitated again.

"I thought I heard somebody moving in the room above, softly, like a cat."

He lifted a finger and motioned to the other to listen, and the hand he raised shook just a trifle.

But nothing came to break the silence save the sound of their own nervous breathing.

"H'm. Must have been a mistake," whispered Carstairs a few minutes later, brushing his hand across his forehead.

Twysden laughed coldly.

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“ Who’s getting jumpy now ? ”

But he had to admit to himself that he was glad they had found the lights.

The illumination disclosed a large room, plentifully furnished, all the pieces being covered by the method they had previously seen, the chairs and a large number of small tables being grouped along the side. The boards were bare, but along the wainscoting most remote from the door which gave on to the hall, lay the carpet in an ungainly, sausage-like roll. There were no pictures on the walls, and the centre lamps—those which were now burning—proved to be unshaded, thus throwing a somewhat critical and unpromising light on the unromantic surroundings.

There were two doors which opened out from the room. The one they were now facing they knew to lead into the entrance-hall, while the other, opening out on the opposite side, and next to a square hatch, they had imagined, and correctly, to give into the pantry.

“ And now what about having a look round ? ” said Carstairs. “ We don’t seem to have struck much gold down here. P’raps there’s a caretaker knocking about somewhere—I’m convinced that we’re not alone here—and, besides, I feel rather like an

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amateur burglar breaking into a house and standing around switchin' on lights and muckin' around with the decorations."

"That's quite all right," said Twysden, "but you'll kindly refrain from leaving this room. I have special reasons, and I mean it. No, I'll give no explanations now, if you don't mind," for Carstairs had begun to expostulate, "but I think I can promise you a satisfactory enough supper off—excitement, at any rate. And now I think there's still some work to be cleared up in here."

He was insistent, and this seemed to be final. Carstairs, not wishing to appear difficult, sauntered across the room and swung himself up into a sitting posture on the side-board, leaning his shoulders against the old-fashioned plate glass mirror with which it was backed.

In the meantime Twysden had started to potter around. After a few minutes:

"Found anything?" asked the idler, swinging his legs and banging his heels against the wooden doors.

"No, nothing much—some cobwebs, a few spiders, and the pantry hatch. But for the Lord's sake don't make such a din."

Then he disappeared behind a pile of chairs.

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Carstairs waited and, while waiting, began to whistle a tune. The lines were rather complicated, or perhaps, had he not been so engrossed in his musical endeavours, he would have observed that one of the improvised curtains now lay in a tumbled heap before the window-panes.

The world, unnoticed by him, showed black outside.

Empty, pitchy darkness.

But suddenly something slid across the face of the glass. It was a human hand, with thin, claw-like fingers.

Presently a voice spoke from the shadows.

"Quick, look at the windows, Carstairs."

He turned his head.

"Good God!" he cried.

Carstairs had only one glance before the apparition vanished.

Twysden had emerged by now.

"Did you see it?" he demanded.

"Yes," gasped his companion, "but how on earth did you? And what the hell was it?"

"Oh, well, the answer to the first question is simple enough. There happens to be a mirror at your back which reflects the windows perfectly, and consequently I could

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see them from where I was standing. Whoever it was, being obviously attracted by the light, happened to be interested enough to try and see who had switched it on, and what they were doing. And now as to what it was ; it looked like a dwarf to me, or a crippled child. Did you notice how it limped away ? ”

Carstairs nodded. He had slipped from off the sideboard and stood facing the window. A sudden thought had come to him, but he was unwilling to divulge it as yet.

“ What’s the next move ? ” he demanded.

“ Nothing for the moment. It’s no earthly good following that ”—he stabbed his finger in the direction of the windows—“ so we had better hang that sheet up again or else switch out the lights.”

Carstairs looked decided.

“ In that case I think I’ll attend to the curtain,” he muttered.

Then they turned their attention to the room again, and Carstairs, who now seemed aware of some overshadowing danger, began to take a keener interest in things.

“ What do you make of this ? ” demanded Twysden. He had crossed the room to a

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side-door and wrenched it open. In so doing he disclosed a table with a meal laid, and places set for two.

Carstairs approached.

"Looks rather like eats," he observed, hungrily scanning the preparations.

"Anything else?"

"Yes; whoever had this, or were having this, left in a hurry."

"Exactly, and, by the heat of these plates, I should say they quitted not so very many minutes ago."

"H'm. Just about when we were on the top of the Cliffs perhaps," murmured Carstairs. "By Jove, yes, and that would explain the light. They doused it not long after we hove into view."

"Yes, that's all right," interposed Twysden, "but then, this room happens to be on the ground floor, and the light we observed was in one of the upper windows."

And Carstairs had to agree that he was right.

Besides, he had not forgotten that weird call of the night bird.

They hesitated, and a booming roll of thunder made them jump.

"Come along," said Twysden, "we'd better

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do something, or we shall get the creeps. We'll begin by following up clue number one." He stepped across and suddenly switched off the lights. Then :

"Follow me," he said.

CHAPTER XVII

ONCE more the little shaft of light burnt out from Twysden's torch as he led the way across the room. Arriving at the sideboard, he half turned towards the windows, and then called Carstairs to his side.

"See anything rum here?" he queried.

Carstairs gave the wall a quick scrutiny in the direction indicated.

"Can't say I do—though, wait a minute." He peered closer. "That looks like a line of light."

"Just about here, eh?"

"Yes, running straight up from the floorboards."

He fingered around the gap through which the gleam shone, and then pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"That's queer," he continued. "I should have said that that was a door, if there had been the ordinary knob and lock."

"Well, I think you're right, anyhow," Twysden said, "only this doesn't happen to be an ordinary door."

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He laughed softly.

The pair of them bent closely over the place ; suddenly Carstairs straightened up.

" Listen," he whispered.

Together they waited with bated breath. Twysden extinguished his torch. In the silence that followed it almost seemed that their suspicions had been groundless. But suddenly there sounded a faint whir and, as they listened, somewhere a clock struck nine.

" Lord, where did that striking come from ? " demanded Twysden in a harsh whisper, clutching at Carstairs' arm in his agitation.

" From the hall, I think," came the cheerful answer. " It's all right ; I heard that perishing clock ticking before."

Twysden uttered an exclamation of annoyance.

" Be blowed to you," he hissed. " If there really is a bit of clockwork in this house, it means that there's also somebody to wind it up."

" Perhaps the people who were here before left it running after they'd gone," suggested Carstairs.

" Impossible ! It would have run down by now. Do you realise that this place

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is supposed to have been deserted for months? ”

Carstairs shook his head.

“ No, I didn’t ; but, then, you seem to know a good deal more about it than I. It doesn’t give me much of a chance of being original.”

“ Don’t be so damned humorous.”

“ Sorry.”

They lapsed into an uneasy silence. Neither spoke, although presently Carstairs heard the sound of a quick intake of breath. For from the room above they had both heard the creak of a loose board under an unwary foot.

The noise was not repeated immediately, but there came others, which told them that someone was crossing the room over their heads.

By and by the steps ceased entirely, and they judged that the unknown had left the room, though they had not heard the opening or closing of a door. Then there came a slight sound from the first landing—an intermittent shuffle and creak.

“ Somebody’s creeping downstairs,” breathed Carstairs.

Twysden nodded apprehensively in the pitch darkness.

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Breathlessly, silently, they waited.

Presently the creaking ceased ; soon came another noise, a suggestion of halting footsteps—closer and closer.

Something crept into the room.

Again Carstairs felt the sensation of tense wonderment.

For a minute Twysden fumbled in his pocket. Then suddenly his torch shone out.

“ I’ll trouble you to put your hands above your head,” he ordered sharply.

In the beam of light was a disreputable old tramp. He stood open-mouthed, and for a moment transfixed. He hesitated for a little, then he saw the glint of a pistol illuminated in the ray. Slowly his hands rose.

“ And now we’ll have a little more illumination on the scene,” said Twysden, nodding in the direction of the door.

Carstairs only too willingly stepped across and snapped down a switch.

He chose at random, and the lamps which he actually lit were those over the side-board. There were three globes, heavily shaded in silk, and, although the gleam from them left some of the farthest corners undiscovered, they at least threw more light

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on the intruder. The bedraggled spectacle showed up even more pathetically in this less sympathetic glare. The unshaven face, and the torn clothes freely bespattered with mire, did little to relieve the general aspect.

The two of them regarded the cringing and unsavoury individual for some moments, but Carstairs failed to catch the sharp glance of recognition between the others.

Suddenly Twysden turned.

"Carstairs, perhaps you'd be so good as to search the house for further stowaways. I reckon I shall be able to deal with this—er—person here. While I do some interrogation, you might have a glance over the first floor. One can never be too careful."

"All right," muttered the other; he walked across, and presently the door closed behind him.

But, left alone, Twysden did little questioning, for it was the tramp who made the first remark. The pistol had disappeared by now.

"Who the hell's that?" he demanded. "I've met him before—to-day, as a matter of fact. But who is he, and why is he here exactly?"

Twysden raised a finger to his lips.

"Not so loud, for God's sake. He'll

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hear, and it's a long way from our game for him even to begin to suspect. Play up, and, above all, don't let him think that I know you ; that would spoil the whole show. He's harmless enough, anyway."

" All right."

" Quick. Tell me how you got on—have you got the pass? "

" Yes, here it is." He thrust a hand into his tattered pocket as he spoke, and produced a small article which shone in the light.

" I left London about three hours ago, and came down in record time. Everything was O.K. I've been in the house here for a few minutes already."

" Ah, then I expect it was you we heard before."

" Possibly. I came over the out-houses to the first floor. There's a convenient window there, so I slipped through."

The man was speaking quickly, earnestly, and jerked out the disjointed sentences as if there was a lot more to come.

" I brought the girl down."

" Splendid," murmured Twysden, " and now——"

His further parlance was cut short by a

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hurried movement on the part of the tattered individual at his side.

"Hold hard!" he whispered.

There came the sound of running steps on the hall-way outside. The door jerked suddenly open, and Carstairs entered. "There's a car coming up the drive; just caught a glimpse of it from the first-floor windows," he whispered. "It's got two johnnies in it; they've stopped the engine and they're coming in here."

"Good God!" muttered Twysden; he turned his face away to hide his emotion. "They aren't wasting much time." Then he whipped around and stood with uplifted finger. "Listen."

And far below, in the lower regions of the house, they heard a bell ringing.

They stood irresolute for a moment; then Carstairs spoke. "Better let 'em in, I suppose."

He moved to the door, opened it, and disappeared.

"I guess they've arrived," whispered Twysden.

The tramp nodded uneasily.

They had but a few moments to wait, for almost immediately, it seemed, Carstairs reappeared, ushering in two gentlemen before him.

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A heavy-jowled, rather insolent-looking man came first, immediately followed by a second individual, his direct physical opposite. For he was thin and wizened, with wrinkled features and a rounded back. He wore a bowler hat, now somewhat dusty, and thrust so far on to his head as to make his ears project excessively ; in addition he possessed a nose which, in company with the remainder of his ensemble, went to prove that his origin was undoubtedly Semitic. It was interesting to note that the first of the pair pounded into the room, while the second seemed to glide into observation—obviously a reflection of their respective characters.

On arrival they both appeared to take the situation in at a glance, and without further introduction proceeded to excuse their presence at a breath.

“Extremely sorry, gents,” volunteered the large man, who seemed to dominate the situation, almost without exception, due to his abnormal physique. “Fact is, we”—he jerked a thumb in his companion’s direction—“seein’ a light in the house, thought we might stop and try for a meal here ; the place is marked as a hotel on the motor maps. In fact, we were beginning to feel mighty relieved when this gentleman answered the door and invited us to ‘hop along in’—I think those were your words, sir ? ”

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Carstairs inclined his head ironically.

"As I say, we did see lights——"

"Where?" interposed Twysden.

"Why, in the first-floor windows, weren't they, Stein?"

Carstairs began to look interested.

"Anyhow, we looked in on chance, but we've apparently made some mistake. The house seems to be in a pretty deserted state."

He paused, waiting for some form of explanation, no doubt, and looked round on the disordered room and discoloured walls.

Twysden was the first to break the silence.

"I see," he remarked. "Most unfortunate, I'm sure. I'm so sorry that we cannot oblige with a meal, but the fact is——"

"Believe me, I quite understand," interposed the thin motorist, Stein. "We all seem to be in the same boat, although I take it that you gentlemen were weather-bound. Most unfortunate, I'm sure. You'll permit me a cigarette before I go?"

"Sure thing." This from Carstairs.

The Jewish gentleman gravely bowed in his direction, then he pulled out a gold case and carefully selected a thin Russian cigarette. He half turned away.

There followed a stilly pause.

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Then suddenly he wheeled round.

“Hands above your heads, the lot of you!”

It was true that he had extracted a match-box from one pocket, but his right hand held a long, businesslike-looking automatic. It now pointed at the three across the room.

In an instant the room became deathly still; only the sudden scrape of a heel came to break the silence which followed. Then:

“Perhaps you’ll now explain the reason for this damned tomfoolery,” hissed Twysden, gone suddenly pale with anger.

“Certainly,” assented Stein, “but at my own convenience alone. At the present moment you may all consider yourselves as being my prisoners.”

“My God!” cried Carstairs. “If I could only get my hands on you now, I’d wring your miserable neck.”

The Jew laughed harshly.

“Then perhaps it’s just as well for me that you can’t, my friend,” came his reply. “In the meantime you will do just as you are told—do you understand? Sit down.”

Carstairs, with his hands ignominiously elevated above his head, eyed the speaker with an expression on his face the reverse of complimentary. For a moment he hesitated, then he dragged up a chair and seated himself.

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"Excellent," purred his captor. "We have arrived at submission at last, I see. And now perhaps you'll have the goodness to explain exactly who you are."

The reply was cut in by a remonstrance from the man who had entered with Stein.

"For God's sake, cut out the soft stuff," he growled. "What in hell's name does it matter who or what he is? Chuck him over the cliff. Let's have done with him."

"One moment," the Jew interjected. "You can consider me as master here, and what I say goes. When we get down to the boat you may carry on. Until then—well, I fancy it remains as my department. Does it not?"

Carstairs had received the first remark with something resembling concern, but the following statement seemed more reassuring, and it was with a good deal of relief that he heard the second speaker grudgingly concede with a growl:

"Oh, very well."

But his attention was next drawn to another quarter.

"I think you can settle with me first," said Twysden. "Have you ever heard of Number Twenty-three?"

Stein straightened up from the habitual

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stooping position of his. "I should say so," he replied.

Twysden extended his left hand, in which reposed a small metal disc. Across the face was traced the number—23. For a moment there was complete silence. Then :

"You win, partner," said the large man. "We've been expecting you all evening. You'll be from London, of course. But say, who's this guy?" indicating the mystified Carstairs, who had been a stupefied witness to the foregoing conversation.

"Oh, him!" he grinned. "He's a naval officer on leave—name o' Carstairs."

As Twysden spoke, Carstairs writhed in his chair and made as if to rise, but, realising the odds against him, and conscious of the pistol still pointing in his direction, he subsided into forced inaction with a groan.

"I see," answered Stein. "And who is that object?"—indicating the sorry person of the tramp, who had been following the conversation with growing apprehension, and now stood shivering in his cracked and broken boots.

"Oh, he's just another refugee from justice like—ourselves," concluded the man who had previously given his name as Twysden.

For a moment nobody spoke. The Jew,

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still with raised pistol, walked over to the windows and carefully pulled the improvised curtains to one side.

Lightning flickered over the sea to the eastward ; dull booms of thunder were to be heard ; but the dark clouds were drifting away, and the claps were sounding fainter.

Suddenly, above the grumbling of the storm, from the garden in front of the house, cut the throb of a shuddering scream.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE quivering echoes of the ringing cry had barely ceased before Carstairs made a sudden movement towards the door. The Jew flashed around on him.

"I'll trouble you to keep still, damn you!" hissed the man behind the gun.

Carstairs stepped back, incredulous.

"But that sounded like a woman's voice!" he gasped.

Stein spread out his hands in a gesture of indifference.

"Quite possibly," was the sneering reply. "We shall see."

They waited in silence; presently the front door opened and then slammed to with a crash.

Steps rang out on the stone hallway, and in another moment there was an interruption.

They all turned to face it.

"What in hell's name——" thundered the tall motorist.

On the threshold stood a thick-set
F

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individual dressed in chauffeur's livery ; a dust-coat covered the upper part of his uniform, but the peaked cloth cap, gaiters, and long gauntlets betrayed his calling. But this was not all, for by his side cringed a young girl, whom he grasped by the arm. The agony in her face went to prove the viciousness of the grip.

She was dressed in clothes which represented nothing more nor less than a mass of tatters. Her stockings, if she ever had possessed any, were conspicuous by their absence, but on the left foot was an ugly, mis-shapen boot of a similar character to that worn by the club-footed.

Her hair, cut short, and clipped straight across the neck, was of a peculiarly fine shade of old gold, and framed a small oval face, the most remarkable features of which were the eyes, staring out into the room with the expression of an overwhipped dog. Now they were brimming with unshed tears, but whether these were really due to mental or physical torture it would have been difficult to say.

Carstairs' heart missed a beat when he recognised the young girl, now the chauffeur's captive, to be Anne, the mysterious figure he had last seen on that tragic occasion on the Cliffs. He recalled almost immediately

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now that when she left him she had turned off in the direction of the White House—the house of terror in which they were both prisoners. Little had he guessed under what curious circumstances their reunion would occur.

She was changed, strangely altered, and there was a pale, drawn look about her face which worried him; but, underlying it all, her expression, her very carriage, he sensed a dormant spirit which, though suppressed by the present ordeal, lay irrepressible and unbroken.

His impetuous heart went out to her immediately, and he would have rushed to her side had he not become conscious of a beady eye squinting down the sights of a gun, held at no greater distance than ten feet from his head.

The tattered tramp, however, being under slightly inferior surveillance, actually stepped forward one pace, but this movement was quickly checked by Stein's companion, who stretched across and, in a single jerk, placed him back in his former position.

The chauffeur was actually the first to speak.

“ Found this bit spying round in the front of the 'ouse ; thought you might be interested. 'Ell of a —— fighter, too ; it weren't till I

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'ad me 'ands on 'er a bit 'eavy that she give in."

He gave the wretched girl another spiteful twist.

"Let's see the young woman—under the light," ordered Stein.

The chauffeur advanced, dragging her across the room by her arm; suddenly she saw the tramp, still in his captor's grip.

"Father!" she sobbed.

The man made an involuntary move forward.

"Keep still, blast you!" growled the thick-set man.

The Jew glanced across at him and, in a silky voice, said: "Ah, your daughter—I see; most regrettable. I presume you are in residence here?"

The wretch nodded sulkily.

Once in the middle of the room, the chauffeur relinquished his grip and pushed the girl roughly forward. Somehow the heavy boot impeded her step and, tripping, she fell heavily before the Jew, a pathetic little bunch of rags and tatters.

Slowly the man looked over her—her hair, and the white shoulders freely exposed through the torn dress; her young, boyish

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figure. Presently his eyes lighted on the clumsy foot, and the smile vanished.

"What shall we do with her, Simmonds?" he demanded, turning to the girl's captor. "Any suggestions?"

"Dunno," growled the liveried man. "Wot's thet door across the way?"

Stein turned to his companion.

"You ought to know, Radley."

The man addressed looked over sulkily.

"That's the pantry," was his answer.

"What sort of order is it in?"

"Empty, I think."

Stein called to Simmonds.

"Give it a look over," he ordered.

The chauffeur walked across and tried the door. It opened freely. Entering, he inspected the place and, having locked a second door, leading out on the far side, presumably to the kitchens, came back and pocketed the key.

"S'all right, guv'nor."

In a fainting condition the agonised girl was flung into the darkness and the bolt shot across.

Radley turned to Stein truculently.

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"Hadn't we better lash her up?" he growled.

"Noa," interrupted the man in livery. "She'll be all in a dead faint under the minute. It's plumb dark in there and full of spiders. Besides, she's not of the acrobatic kind, even if she could force the shutters."

He laughed in an ugly manner.

"Very well then, Simmonds," said the Jew. "You may go. I shall want the car in about a quarter of an hour, and you can turn it while you're waiting. Our next move will be into Brenport, but first I shall have to attend to a few matters in connection with our—er—friends here."

Growling his acknowledgments, the man withdrew.

Radley, Stein, and Number Twenty-three, whom Carstairs had hitherto known as Twysden, then withdrew to one end of the room. The former had now produced a gun also; Number Twenty-three, as he had seen, already had one in his possession; the man now slipped a half-shade of thick satin over his lower features.

Carstairs looked about him desperately. A loophole of escape had opened out, now that his captors' faces were turned from him, and

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he felt that could he but burst through the French windows, so tantalisingly close to his left shoulder, he would be clean away before Stein and his company were able to summon up their resources to recapture him.

That any movement would be a grave risk he knew. He was up against things pretty solidly, and no one realised better than himself that if he played a false card he would answer for the error with his life.

Radley was the kind of individual who would shoot first and apologise afterwards, and the shot he fired would be aimed to kill. They were all in a dangerous game, and he guessed that up to the present he had been living on the fringes of it only. But now he was in the very centre, and his heart beat wildly when he attempted to find some answer for it all, or, better still, some remedy from his wretched position.

These thoughts were coursing through his mind at express speed when suddenly he felt the claw-like grip of a thin hand on his arm. He looked wonderingly round, almost with the same excitement which he had felt on the Cliffs that afternoon, to find that the frowsy tramp had edged to his side.

As Carstairs looked, he saw that the man's

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lips were moving. He listened, and then faintly the words came to him :

“ Stand fast.”

A long pause. Then :

“ There is a man almost directly behind you.”

Carstairs inclined his head a fraction to intimate that he had heard and understood.

Then he slowly swung round, and immediately saw that he was beaten. Standing perhaps a yard away was a new arrival, whose form of entry was little less than a complete enigma. He was armed and, even at the first glance, Carstairs realised that his hopes of escape were dashed. In addition, he recognised in the tall stranger the form and figure of the man with the scarred face.

After a moment's debate, in which no definite course of action seemed to have been decided, the tramp and Carstairs were separated, the latter being gagged and bound to one of the chairs, with which the room was amply supplied, while the old beggar-man, with his hands tied behind his back, and mildly protesting, was hustled away before them at the muzzle of Number Twenty-three's revolver.

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"I think we may now proceed below," propounded Stein, looking around for approbation.

Number Twenty-three agreed with a nod. Radley moved across to the fireplace.

CHAPTER XIX

THE following proceedings Carstairs was utterly at a loss to account for. Unable to move hand or foot, he also found himself incapable of any movement of his head, for a strangle hitch, which had been dragged taut around his throat, made breathing, except in one strained position, utterly impossible. He had been bound up mercilessly, and the securing ropes cut deeply into his wrists and ankles.

He heard Radley move and cross the room behind him, and he had assumed that the man now stood somewhere near the open hearth. Then he became aware of a click, and a faint, indescribable noise which continued for some seconds. It was tantalisingly close, but behind him, and he was utterly unable to see what had happened.

This, on ceasing, gave way to another sound which, to his trained hearing, told him could be nothing else than the beat of the sea. Very far away it sounded, nearly imperceptible.

It continued for some minutes, then the

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voices of his captors faded, and finally ceased altogether.

He was alone.

Sitting rigidly upright on the hard wooden chair, Carstairs did some rapid thinking.

Who were these adventurers, with their guns and threats and talk of some boat or other?

Who was this impostor who called himself Twysden, and now answered to a purely numerical nomenclature?

What bond was there between him and the two motorists and their evil chauffeur?

There were perhaps a few things which seemed pretty certain, and, although equally unenlightening, were pointers which remained outstanding. The first was that the tramp and his cripple daughter were sheltering here for the time being; that would explain the lights and—oh, yes—the table laid for two. And, now he came to think of it, the girl had undoubtedly been the apparition at the window. What an ass he had been!

The mental activity braced him up, and the stimulus of what he considered to be partial success, at least, spurred him to further efforts.

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The beggar-girl he had immediately recognised as being Anne ; so far so good ; but the elderly man whom he had heard her address as " father " still mystified him. The voice he seemed vaguely to remember, and also the gleam in the quick eyes when he had turned to listen.

But somehow the exact placing of the man failed him, and the knowledge that he had been beaten on this one point began to annoy him.

He suddenly felt that he wanted to whistle ; found he couldn't. Discovered, instead, that he was generating a most uncomfortable stiff neck. If only he could move—just a shade !

Perhaps there was somebody in the room, behind him. His imagination began to play him quaint tricks. Perhaps some fiend was staring in through the windows—was at his back even now !

" Oh, God ! " groaned Carstairs.

It seemed an age that he had been sitting there ; the cords seemed to bite into his flesh like steel bands.

Queer little tingling sensations in his arms and legs warned him that his limbs were preparing for a state of somnolence.

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Seconds seemed to pass like minutes—minutes like veritable eons.

If only he had taken second leave !

B-o-o-m ! rumbled a sudden roll of thunder. The storm was returning over the sea.

Lightning flickered outside, throwing weird shadows across the dimly lit, uncarpeted floor. For only the shaded side-lights over the sideboard illuminated the room now.

Funny that this uncertain light should unnerve one, ruminated Carstairs.

Silently he sat, trussed up like a fowl.

What were those devils going to do with him ? Shoot him in cold blood ? That chauffeur would do it quite cheerfully. Perhaps they'd leave him there—to starve.

“ Oh, God ! ” groaned Carstairs again.

As he sat on there, he found himself beginning to curse Twysden. For what in the name of all that was powerful had made him (Carstairs) ever think of going to that wretched place Brenport again ? Ghastly hole. Lord, how he loathed it now !

And Twysden too. Number Twenty-three ! Faugh ! The very thought of the man made him feel sick. And where had he been last

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night? Hobnobbing with Radley, most probably.

In the meantime there was that poor girl in the pantry, and probably in a dead faint as well. Carstairs could not help hoping that she did not mind spiders.

Time ran on—in reality, only about two minutes in all.

There came a faint squeak.

Nothing much—just the suspicion of a sound.

Carstairs' nerves, already on edge, began to tingle. Another little squeak—then a succession of rasping noises.

Then silence.

Carstairs wasn't provided with eyes in the back of his head. Had he been so fitted he would have had a vision of a peculiarly shaped leg sliding through the pantry hatch. One that was closely followed by another—one which terminated in a grossly mis-shapen boot.

The limbs were followed by a tumble of skirts and finally by a dishevelled mop of gold-coloured hair.

Carstairs was aware only of the rustle of clothes and the creak of boards, and held his breath accordingly.

A minute later—and after what seemed like

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a year to him—he felt the pressure of a body at his side, and presently a low voice spoke, and the breath of the whispered words was on his cheek.

“Don’t make a noise, please, and I’ll loosen the gag. The knots aren’t easy, but I think there’s a knife around somewhere.” And off she went in search. Presently she was again at his side. A moment later and he found that he could move his head. By twisting round he could see her busy at the cords with a wicked-looking carving-knife. He could just catch her reflection in the sideboard mirror.

Some of the bonds were already beginning to loosen, and the work of unlashng was about to commence when suddenly, from far away below, came the faint sound of voices. And the voices were becoming steadily louder.

Like a startled hare, the girl glanced quickly around for a suitable hiding-place. Finally she sped to the door, despite the drag of the ungainly boot, opened it, and, without a second look, disappeared.

A moment after, the Jew and Radley appeared in the room. How they had got there exactly, Carstairs was unable to see, but by the loudness of their voices he guessed, and guessed correctly, that they were only a few yards away.

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Feigning unconsciousness, he let them approach.

They passed him without a glance, but suddenly, at the door, Stein turned back and said something in an undertone to his companion. Radley expostulated, but nevertheless Stein crossed the room, passing behind the chair that Carstairs was secured to. For one moment the prisoner feared that his severed cords might have been observed, but they had not come back for him. He guessed that it must have been the girl, for the Jew tried the door which led to the pantry, but with no success.

"Curse it!" he snarled. "That scoundrel Simmonds must have removed the key."

"Oh, come on, for God's sake!" growled Radley.

Muttering maledictions on the head of the unfortunate chauffeur, they left the room together and slammed the door behind them.

When they had both gone, Carstairs straightened his neck and looked about him.

What had happened to the miserable old tramp?

And where was that arch-fiend Twysden?

For some moments Carstairs remained immobile; then he realised that to all intents and purposes he was free.

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With an intensive series of wriggles and jerks, movements which sent pain shooting through his entire body, he gradually slipped the ropes, and by the time he was released, the circulation had been sufficiently restored to allow him to stand up.

He allowed himself the luxury of two or three good stretches before he began seriously to look around.

CHAPTER XX

ONE of the things that Carstairs discovered, in his first rapid glance around the room, was the fact that one place to the side of the windows, originally a bare expanse, was now pierced by a narrow opening.

It showed dim beyond.

The house was in dead silence ; the front door had slammed shut behind Radley and the Jew long ago.

Carstairs moved forward to investigate.

Cautiously he crept to the opening and peered through. Below him was a small, cellar-like room, feebly illuminated by a flickering oil lamp. Directly at his feet was the top step of a narrow flight of stone stairs which led to its flag-paved floor.

It was impossible to get a clear view of the whole of the apartment from this position, for the walls of the staircase closed in, blanking off the majority of it from observation.

About to proceed, Carstairs first glanced back into the room he was going to vacate. It was still only dimly lit. But suddenly :

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“Hullo!” he whispered to himself, aghast.

When last he had seen the door it had been shut tight; now it was off the latch, and, good God! it was swinging slowly open!

Fascinated, back to the wall, he waited, but eventually, when he saw who had her hand on the lock, he came near to sobbing with relief.

Suddenly, when the opening was wide enough, the little beggar-girl slipped into the room.

“Quick,” she whispered, “you must get on to the chair again; they’re coming back!”

“Now look here,” argued Carstairs, “I’m fed up with giving in like this. For goodness’ sake, let’s show a bit of fight for a change.”

“Don’t be silly,” she answered, still in her queer, hoarse little voice. “You wouldn’t stand a chance. The house and the cellars are full of men. Besides, I don’t want you to risk getting hurt.”

Carstairs looked at her quickly.

“Because I want you to be useful later. Come on.”

He moved to the chair and seated himself once again.

Skilfully she arranged the ropes about

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him. In a moment it looked as if he had never been loose at all, much less out of his bonds and walking about.

Carstairs watched the play of her nimble fingers.

It was strange, he thought to himself, for he could have sworn that she used some kind of scent. Her hair was almost brushing his face, and he had distinctly caught the suspicion of some bewitching essence.

He began wondering why she had made that remark about getting hurt, but, then, why should she mind particularly?

He found himself looking at her again—more interestedly this time. Yes, she was a pretty kid. Then he thought of that malformed foot. What a damned shame!

She stood back for one instant and surveyed him critically in the half-light. Then she readjusted the gag.

“You’ll do,” she whispered. “But try and give the impression that you’re uncomfortable, even if you’re not. Remember you’ve got cramp and a stitch and that you haven’t moved for ten minutes. You won’t be able to convince anybody if you can’t convince yourself.”

Over the top of the gag he winked.

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Suddenly came the sound of footsteps in the hall. How the front door had opened and shut without their knowledge was beyond comprehension.

For one moment it looked as if the girl was certainly trapped. It seemed to Carstairs that she stood no chance of concealment. But he had reckoned without her quick woman's intuition.

With a flurry of skirts she darted to the secret panel, and disappeared from view almost at the same instant that Radley appeared at the open doorway and strode in.

Half-way across the room another figure showed on the threshold.

"You *would* forget that!" sneered Stein.

Radley manipulated some device, a motion which was followed by a low rasping noise.

The panel shot to with a clang.

Without a glance at their prisoner they left the room. Carstairs waited some minutes before he loosed the ropes, then leapt to the secret doorway, which was now, beyond the possibility of breaking it down, quite impassable.

"Oh, hell!" he cried.

He looked frenziedly about him, and beat loudly on the hollow wall. He ran his fingers around the thin opening which lined

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the concealed doorway, but the place was sealed as closely as a safe.

A chill draught beat upon his cheek from the deep casements, which had now swung open, but he heeded nothing except the safety of the brave little heroine who was trapped in the cellars below.

He vainly racked his brains for some plan, but none came ; and presently he sank his head weakly forward and pillowed it on his cut and tortured wrists. For a few moments he rested, leaning over the sealed opening, but presently he straightened up and allowed his hands to fall to his sides.

“ I’m finished,” he breathed.

There was a short pause of about a second’s duration, and then :

“ That’s unfortunate,” said a low voice, almost at his elbow.

CHAPTER XXI

CARSTAIRS whipped around, and had already raised an arm to strike, when he found himself facing an individual he had not seen before on this memorable evening.

One glance at the windows, which now stood wide open, was sufficient evidence to prove the stranger's method of entrance.

"Just a minute, Bo," urged the newcomer, "not quite so much of the 'dime novel,' if you please."

He slowly produced a small black note-book from his hip-pocket while Carstairs, anticipating some weapon, made a dive at the hand as it reappeared.

On seeing that he had mistaken the motion, he stepped back, his right palm pressed to his side.

"My God, you put the wind up me, but—who the hell are you?" he demanded.

The other smiled benignly.

"Ah-ha!" was his answer. "We're getting polite. We shall get along grand in a minute or two. Now——"

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“Yes, I dare say—but who are you?” demanded the perplexed Carstairs.

“George Washington,” grinned the stranger.

This was too much for Carstairs.

He stepped back and studied the other carefully.

He was a small, rather sharp-featured little man, wearing horn-rimmed glasses, behind which the dark eyes, magnified by the heavy lenses, had a habit of blinking and shining humorously. He carried neither stick nor gloves and appeared to be armed with nothing more pretentious than a short indelible pencil which he was balancing in the palm of his left hand.

His hat was thrust back off his lined forehead and his grey tweed overcoat was unbuttoned and flapping loosely open.

He had a habit of occasionally looking nervously from side to side, but there was a general air of self-possession which Carstairs found undoubtedly reassuring. He eyed him in silence, but presently the other continued quickly :

“And now let’s get to business—you may call me Smith if you like. You probably won’t believe it’s my real name to begin with, but it’s quite a good one. I’m a reporter, if you

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must know, on vacation, and stopping at Cranburn, about five miles off, round the coast. I happened to be passing near here and I thought I saw signalling—from the upper windows. I stepped in closer to investigate—business instinct, I suppose—and I saw the signals answered from the bay.”

He paused an instant, perhaps for effect.

“ Then I saw a light in this room and, when I came near enough to the window, observed an irritated gentleman trussed up on a chair. That was you. Next I observed two other gents enter and leave. When they were safely away I forced my way in to render necessary assistance, and found you free and hammering at the wall.

“ You made a pathetic statement, and the witness sympathises—that’s me—and I guess that’s all.”

This disjointed monologue, carried out in almost one breath, put Carstairs at his ease ; for the first time that evening he found himself involuntarily believing in somebody.

“ Shake ! ” he said.

“ Sure,” said Smith.

Then he stepped over and inspected the panel, and presently looked round at the other.

“ Well, that’s that,” continued Carstairs, “ but it doesn’t help things much.”

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He turned helplessly away and fell to pacing the room, with his hands clasped behind his back. Smith started to hum a tune.

"Oh, shut up, for the Lord's sake!" rapped out Carstairs. "You'll warn the whole house that we're about."

Smith whistled softly.

"Phew! What are we up against, then?" he demanded, becoming suddenly grave.

But Carstairs shook his head.

"I don't quite know," he admitted, "but one thing is certain—we must do what we can about the girl."

"What girl? Yours?" queried Smith nonchalantly.

Carstairs felt his face colouring and then was angry with himself.

"No," he snapped.

"Oh, all right. Anyhow, I don't see what all the trouble's about."

Carstairs looked at him with a disapproving eye.

"Don't be a fool," he said.

"But, my dear sir," exploded the reporter, "didn't I tell you I was spying in here and saw the men in the room myself?"

"Yes, but I don't see how that helps. The panel's shut on Anne—that's the girl I was

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talking about—and I don't know how it works. I've always had my back turned to that part of the show."

"Then this is where I come in," said Smith triumphantly, "because I happen to have seen the large gent work it."

Carstairs looked across wonderingly.

"By Jove, so you did," he blurted out. "You're a perishing marvel."

Smith bowed. "I don't know if I qualify as a 'marvel' altogether, but I've always been considered a bit of a live wire."

"Same thing."

His companion shook his head.

"I'm not so sure," he murmured.

"Oh, come on," demanded Carstairs impatiently. "Let's have the secret of the panel."

Smith moved across to the fireplace.

"Watch it," he said.

Arriving at the grate, he bent down and jerked at the left-hand set of fire-dogs. To the other's amazement he saw that the piece was free to move, and pivoted round like a lever.

Then Carstairs looked back to the other side of the room. He saw the panel rise and start to slide quickly upwards.

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But this was not all.

He had been standing close in front of the widening aperture, when there came a sudden shout from Smith.

He staggered back aghast, for, just as it opened fully, the figure of a man swung forward from the darkness beyond, fell outwards, and crashed to the floor at Carstairs' feet.

He looked down fearfully at the blood-stained face.

"It's the tramp," he gasped in a hushed whisper, dropping to his knees.

"*Who* is it?" queried Smith, advancing, note-book in hand.

"Don't know," was the encouraging answer. "But give me a hand with him for the Lord's sake. Is he dead?"

"H'm," ejaculated Smith a moment later. "Damn nearly—nasty wound in the head. 'Fraid we can't do anything much."

Carstairs pulled out a pocket-handkerchief, and stanchd the flow of blood issuing from a shallow wound just over the left temple.

It seemed in the half-light that the cut had been inflicted by a bullet, which had slashed a furrow through the tight skin close beside the ear.

As far as he could see, no bones had been

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broken, and it looked as if a simple bandage would solve the difficulty. The man lay insensible, seemingly dead, but they could both see that he had been badly stunned, which would account for his terrifying stillness.

They manufactured an improvised bandage out of a pocket-handkerchief, and wedged Smith's rolled-up coat under his head. They had done what they could.

The reporter looked across enquiringly and was seemingly about to speak, when suddenly a shot rang out, a shot whose report was heard to come through the open panel.

Carstairs started to his feet immediately and made for the ominous opening.

"Come on," he said. "I guess we're wanted down here."

"I'm not so sure about that," gasped Smith. "But all the same—lead on, Macduff."

CHAPTER XXII

I

" HERE ! " breathed Smith. " Steady on ! "

Carstairs looked back at him with a smile.

" That's easy, we're back at the bottom of the outfit," he said.

They both paused to look round.

At the time of their plunge through the opening above, neither had known what to expect below, but they had arrived, and had found themselves in a deserted cellar of medium proportions, ill-furnished and illuminated by the light of an oil lamp alone.

Two long cupboards lined the far wall, the ladder occupied the greater portion of the opposite one, while the other two were void of use or decoration and glistened bright with damp. The ceiling was plastered, after a fashion, and the flagged floor, worn with age and green with mould, rang to their footsteps.

" Pretty tombish," whispered Smith.

" It is rather perishing," admitted Carstairs.

" Well, where do we go from here ? "

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Carstairs shrugged his shoulders.

“ Goodness knows.”

If he had been asked, he would have admitted to feeling genuinely disappointed, for he had felt positive that the concealed panel, and the stairs which it gave on to, would lead him to the protection of Anne.

He had already confessed that he knew nothing of this house of terror, nor of the queer characters who peopled it, but he could guess that he was indirectly up against some collection of men whose uppermost thought, at the present moment, seemed to be centred on his destruction.

Carstairs was not afraid of death in the accepted sense, but he could feel that the overshadowing mystery of the place was wearing away his powers of resistance. He felt like some wretched fly trapped on the outer threads of a sinister and intangible web.

Slowly and inexorably, he knew, was advancing a strange avenger, one who would demand a human life for probing the mysteries of the house on the headland.

Five minutes ago, even now, he was free to go as he pleased, but the idea of his escape without his little ally, Anne, approached the impossible, until he knew that she was safe.

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He felt helpless and a little tired.

Then he turned to Smith, and together they began a fruitless search.

No opening or outlet was to be seen, barring their own method of entry, yet a pistol shot had been distinctly heard.

"Couldn't have been imagination," said Carstairs.

"Imagination, hell!" ejaculated Smith scornfully. "Why, it nearly blew my ear drum in."

Carstairs began to poke about in the dark corners.

"I think I'll go and take a look at the old boy up top," said Smith, at the end of a few minutes' fruitless search.

"All right." In their excitement the wounded man had been forgotten.

Smith sprang up the steps.

He was gone thirty seconds perhaps when his voice suddenly rang out from the room above.

"Hey, come up here, Bo."

Carstairs gave up his inspection and made to rejoin Smith. At the top of the staircase, however, he stopped short.

"Holy snakes—he's gone!" he gasped.

"Sure thing," said Smith.

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They returned to the cellar together.

"Well, of all the queer shows, blow me if this ain't the durndest," growled the reporter. "It simply freezes me--what with pistol-shots and secret panels an'—ooh!—anyhow, it'll be something to write up."

From one of his pockets he abstracted a copy, one day old, of the paper on whose staff he worked.

He held it up disdainfully.

"There you are, now look at it, not an article worth the reading, although I say it myself. And why?" He furnished the reply himself. "Because things don't happen nowadays. It's Bolshy meetings, or railway strikes and such like. And plenty of them, I admit. But somehow they make me feel sick. And now look what they could have done in the Middle Ages with the chances they had. There's good stuff there, and later on too—pirates and highwaymen and the days when smuggling was known. Gosh, I can see the leading article now."

He paused rapturously.

"That was romance, I tell you; that's what the public really wants."

He struck the palm of one hand with the knotted fist of the other.

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“ If I had my way, I'd—— Oh, holy gee ! ”

The drift of this monologue had caused him to look up, and the sight which met his eyes had been pretty unnerving. Carstairs followed the direction of his gaze and started back with a sudden shout, for the secret panel at the top of the stairs was moving, and the opening was already almost blanked.

They rushed to the steps, but it was too late. By the time they were at the head of the stairs the exit was closed. Carstairs flung his whole weight upon it, but it was as immovable as before, and down they blundered, beaten men, for neither of them could even guess at the method of opening from this side.

Smith threw himself into a crazy chair and drew it up to the rickety table upon which the lamp was burning. With nothing better to do, he re-opened the paper he had so recently condemned and lazily turned over the pages.

Carstairs impatiently crossed the cellar, opened one of the cupboards, and closed it with an impatient swing, for it was empty. An exclamation from Smith, however, caused him to move towards the table. On one of the back pages appeared an article which

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read as follows, couched in somewhat picturesque journalese :

THE YELLOW MENACE

and, beneath this, the less flamboyant sub-headings :

Opium Smoking on the Increase
Fashionable Flats as Dope Dens

Smith read the following out aloud :

“ It has come to our knowledge that a new outbreak of opium smoking, together with the trafficking of various drugs, amongst which are included cocaine, veronal, and heroin, has broken out in this country.

“ So far it would appear the spread is most marked in the West End of London—and by no means confined to the East side, amongst Chinese sailors.

“ The C.I.D. has organised a campaign to stamp it out, and several apparently respectable houses are under observation, these in the most prosperous quarters.

“ The organisation, we understand, is in the hands of a wealthy Chinaman, whose identity up to now has not been

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exposed. The scheme of supply is exceedingly clever, and works through many channels ; indeed, the concern with which the quantity and secrecy of the immense supplies are regarded, for they are literally pouring into England, can hardly be overestimated.

“ Detectives are constantly discovering some new means whereby the drugs are handled and passed into the country ; but it is felt that the channel through which the main supply is introduced has, up to now, not been revealed.”

There followed a short pause.

“ H'm ; well, there you are,” grunted Carstairs, “ there’s your smuggling for you.”

“ Precious lot of good that is, isn’t it ? ” sneered Smith.

Carstairs laughed shortly.

“ You’re difficult to please, aren’t you ? ” He tapped the folded paper. “ That’s a good story, and something new as well.”

The other seemed annoyed.

“ Don’t talk rot. Besides, I wrote that article myself. If I were only in the Thames River Patrol now, it might give me a bit of a hope, but as it is ”—he shrugged his

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shoulders—"it strikes me I'm up against a bit of a dead end."

"I'm not so sure about that," murmured Carstairs quietly.

Smith shot him a swift suspicious look, and then continued:

"But anyhow we can't stop yarning here all day. Let's get down to plain facts. First of all, it's up to us to get out of here, just as a start."

Carstairs strolled along the walls, sounding them as he spoke, then tapped on the floor, but all to no purpose. They were securely cornered in the grim cellar.

"Let's have a look at these darned cupboards," suggested Smith.

"I've tried one—it was empty."

"Well, it doesn't follow that the other is."

Carstairs stepped to the second cupboard, impatiently jerked the door open, and looked inside. This also was void of interest, but it stretched back to a greater depth. It was impossible to probe the shadows from his present standpoint. He stepped inside and the door slammed to, with a clang like a safe, behind him.

Smith had examined the other by now, and was just looking round, when he thought he heard a choking cry from Carstairs, then the drumming of fists upon woodwork.

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He paused, but there followed a tense silence.

Stepping across to this further cupboard, he flung it wide open, but it was dark inside and he had to fetch the lamp to verify his suspicions.

Under the illumination of this—feeble as it was—it showed empty.

“ Oh, Gawd ! ” gasped Smith.

Too stupefied even to form a course of action for some moments, he eventually stumbled across to the table and there, pulling out his little black note-book, proceeded to set down everything that had transpired that evening in narrative form.

It was some time before this was in any way complete, but when he eventually set down his pen he felt that, so far at any rate, the evening had not been ill spent.

He had been very engrossed in his shorthand notes, and in consequence had scarcely noticed the things which were happening in his immediate vicinity.

He had hardly set pen to paper indeed before the secret panel began to move, and it was but a matter of seconds before a man's figure was disclosed—one who wore a black mask across his face and who stepped silently to the stair-head.

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The apparition appeared to be unarmed, and merely stood, motionless, with folded arms, peering down through the slits in the black satin at the seated figure below.

Presently, as we have seen, Smith's work was complete. Indeed he was about to replace the note-book in his pocket when his eyes, happening to rove in that direction, saw the watching figure which brooded over him. He was on his feet in a moment ; it was true that no weapon was to hand, but nature had provided him with a quick brain and steady hand. The chair, he decided in a flash, was the only useful and mobile form of offensive ; indeed his hand was already on it when the masked figure spoke for the first time.

" I should advise you to refrain from violence "—the warning was uttered in a calm and even voice. " You have been covered by one of my excellent servants for a matter of about five minutes."

Smith spun round.

At the second cupboard, now flung wide open, stood another figure whose right hand grasped a business-like Colt.

The muzzle was pointed full at Smith's head.

" Oh, holy gee ! " he gasped.

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2

While Smith was busy collecting his shattered nerves, the newcomer descended the steps and moved across the room towards him.

The dark eyes behind the mask flashed dangerously, and the hands, loosely hanging at his sides, clenched and unclenched with concealed passion. Yet his voice when he spoke again was suave and mild, and the questions he put were framed in more friendly terms than might have been anticipated.

"Search him, Cleaver." The armed man stepped briskly forward and ran his hands over the prisoner's person.

"S'all right, guv'nor."

"Ah, just as well for you—er"—he waited for the reporter to supply the information—"er—Smith."

He hesitated.

"I wonder what you were christened."

He paused again, smiling grimly.

"But now perhaps you'll be good enough to explain exactly who you are. You're no common burglar, I can see that."

"Oh, thanks," returned Smith with perfect *savoir-faire*. "I'm not such a mug as all that."

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“What the devil do you mean?” demanded the other.

“Well, I reckon that anybody who forced their way into this house to-night would be a damned fool.”

The masked man smiled grimly at this pleasantry.

“We’ll let it pass,” he decided, as Smith sullenly refused to speak further. “Now you’ll come with me. Cleaver, lead the way if you please. Smith will follow you; and remember I am fully armed.”

They ascended the stairs again and re-entered the House of Darkness.

CHAPTER XXIII

SMITH was still busy with his own investigations while Carstairs was experimenting in the second cupboard. It was empty, as he had imagined, and yet, as he stood at the door, he fancied that he heard a faint sound coming from the shadows at the far end. He had consequently stepped in and, although the entrance immediately closed with a loud click behind him, Carstairs had fumbled his way forward and, after a second or two, encountered the wooden back.

With the door shut, the sound that he had already heard became more intensified, and presently it was distinctly recognisable, for in it he had verified the fact that this was nothing more or less than the faint wash and beat of the sea.

A surge of questions rushed in upon him.

Was this cupboard-back a means of ingress to some further cellar with a subterranean connection to the open water ?

He fumbled along the dim walls.

Suddenly a chink of light shot out ; he

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hammered on the woodwork, and a swinging panel pivoted open before him. Through this gap he stepped, and it closed immediately. Some secret spring had operated the catch.

Somewhat overcome by this, and still a trifle shaken at the subsequent discovery, he stood transfixed where he had landed. It proved to be a narrow shelf projecting over a great cavern, which stretched darkly below and beyond him ; and, stunned though he was by the unexpected position he now found himself in, he was further staggered by the bewildering sight which met his startled gaze.

The spectacle was amazing in its unreality, and Carstairs had to resort almost to pinching to reassure himself, and thus prove satisfactorily that he was not becoming a victim of any hallucination.

That the cave was indeed the work of nature and not the result of human conception and endeavour was his first impression. Huge arc lamps stood on ledges or hung from overhead in distant places, brightly burning, but hardly of sufficient power, even then, to illuminate the deeper recesses of the gloom.

Giant stalagmites reared themselves from the rocky bottom, and at one place, where the reflection of the roof was mirrored to perfection, he saw a wide black pool, by the movement of whose surface he surmised, and

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rightly, that it was a tidal basin. The floor was fifty or sixty feet below, and reached by a swinging rope ladder.

The whole place, as he had seen, was illuminated by electricity, which possibly accounted for the pureness of the atmosphere. Somewhere, possibly from a distant corner, came the lazy hum of a concealed dynamo, and shadowy figures of men moved in the dim shades.

Eagerly he looked about him, taking in all the details, for he realised that it must be to this mysterious cavern that Anne had descended.

Whether she was now captured, or had managed to conceal herself, he was unable even to guess ; but the fact of being near to her, if only to prove impotent even then, was a reassuring thought. *

“ By Jove ! ” breathed Carstairs, “ that looks like a hut.”

A low stone building lay at his feet. The means of descent next received his attention, and the tidal basin it led to.

And it was then, at this first clear glimpse of the uneasy black pool, that Carstairs got his greatest surprise—one which forced him to scramble, immediately, heedless of caution, down the ladder.

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The descent on the swinging rungs took but a few seconds, and he was at its foot in so short a time that to a landsman it might have appeared a miracle.

He stepped across the rock he had landed on, and peered warily about him. That his descent had not been observed he felt assured, but his next movements called for the maximum of care and forethought.

From the shelf on which he had stood, the pool and the mystery it contained were partially blanked by a huge wall of rock, but he decided first to creep along the precipitous side of the cave and learn as many of its secrets as quickly as possible.

He moved on a few steps cautiously, and felt that he must now be approaching the sea. The booming crash of waves came to him distinctly, and it was not long before he realised that the outer wall of the cavern—the one he now faced—must give directly on to the open water. The sound he heard was indeed the drumming of the surf on the cliff-side.

Then his thoughts travelled to the dark pool he had seen. Obviously, judging by the movement of its surface, it was connected directly with the open water. This would account for the uneasy, heaving expanse and the

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object of mystery which now broke its oily surface.

Carstairs scrambled quickly forward, and glanced up at the great cathedral-like roof, before he turned the last corner to the cavern pool.

The place was strangely still, and as he crept forward Carstairs could almost imagine that he was alone, although he was acutely aware that relatively within a few feet of him were men who might look on his presence as being wholly too compromising, and who would probably take his life off-hand were he once perceived.

There was still a narrow rocky ledge to be traversed, and then a flight of steps. He was very close to the water now and the short causeway which acted as a form of jetty.

Suddenly he hesitated, and then stepped back with a horrified cry, but it was too late, for three pairs of eyes had been watching him and it was three pairs of strong arms that encircled him, not two seconds after his feet had touched the rock.

The fight was as short as it was sharp, and, although he struggled valiantly, not many moments had elapsed before his unconscious

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body was thrown into the low stone building that he had seen so recently from the shelf above.

One of the men meditatively returned a short sandbag to his hip pocket.

CHAPTER XXIV

JUST about the time that Carstairs had received that blow on the back of the head, a heavy touring-car swung into the main road which led along the crest of the hills, and finally turned to drop away down towards the sea.

Simmonds was driving at his utmost, for his passengers were impatient, and, although the wind was high, snatches of the conversation came to him above the running of the eddies.

"I shall want a full report from Number Twenty-three when we get back," Stein was saying. "I don't altogether like that story of the woman they saw in the garden at Hampstead that night. I very much doubt that he is the type for exaggerating anything, even if it held some significance ; all the same, what he said sounds rather dangerous."

Radley agreed.

"I'm sorry I've been up North for so long," he growled. "If I'd been in town that would never have happened."

Stein shrugged his shoulders.

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"You can never be too sure," he asserted. "But, as I said before, I don't like the way things are shaping. There are too many alarms to please me."

He looked over at the other sharply, and hooded his eyes with his deep-set lids.

"Who the devil do you think this man Carstairs is? And how do you account for that family of beggars?"

It was Radley's turn to look doubtful.

"God alone knows," came his answer eventually. "I'm inclined to look on those tramp wretches as being genuine enough, but I don't feel quite so certain about that naval officer, even if he really is one."

Stein nodded in sympathy.

"Just what I feel," he admitted. "Thank the Lord we got him trussed before he could do any more damage."

He laughed unpleasantly.

"Not that he could have made much trouble, really, with the men in the cavern below."

He paused.

"All the same, he was a character I had hardly reckoned with, somehow."

They lapsed into silence as the car rushed onwards through the night.

Presently they slowed down, and soon

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recognised that they were approaching a dim haze studded with lights.

The road dipped suddenly, and presently Simmonds swung the wheel over and brought them into the Brenport High Street, where he pulled up before a small inn whose shutters had been barred these two hours.

Beside the door which was labelled "Saloon Entrance" was an opening to a narrow passage-way which apparently led into a small flagged yard beyond. The brakes had hardly been applied and the car stopped, before the door of the back seats was thrown open and Radley stepped down, closely followed by the Jew.

"This way, Stein," whispered the former, plunging forward down the dark alley and disappearing into the shadows.

The Jew followed as closely as the broken and uneven surface would permit, and it was not long before they both stood outside a low doorway, under the sill of which shone a faint glimmer of light. Two faint knocks, followed by one other, after a pause, brought no immediate response, but the fact that the light had been instantly extinguished showed that the inmates, whoever they might be, were at least awake and alert.

The two men waited impatiently enough, but presently the sound of shuffling footsteps

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became audible, and the door, having been stealthily unbolted, then proceeded to swing silently open before them. Radley, again taking the lead, stalked in down a flight of stone steps, along a dark corridor, and finally through a curtained entrance into a brightly-lit room beyond, in which the clinking of glasses went to prove that the company, whoever it might be, was entertaining itself.

Three or four men sat, or lounged, around a table which occupied the centre of the cellar, for it was little more, but the whitewashed sides were clean, and reflected the glare of the one lamp, making the place seem considerably brighter than it otherwise might have been.

Although Stein had never visited the village of Brenport before, he was aware that he now stood at the coastal headquarters, and was at the moment in the basement of the little Royal Hotel.

It was a mean-looking apartment, considering the munificent rent that was paid for it, but it was convenient for the distribution department, Radley had found, and the place had been hired outright.

The cellars were well concealed, and, as no one even glanced at the sunken entrance which his men used, no questions were asked,

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so the arrangement was eminently satisfactory to all parties concerned.

On dark nights, muffled figures might have been seen filing in and out of the low doorway, and, in the silence of some starry dawns, there would come the sound of waiting cars.

Yet with the coming of day, the yard was found to be deserted and the low doorway bolted and barred.

Stein, from reports, had expected to find a sordid retreat, but as he looked swiftly around he saw that his information had erred.

The place was comfortably enough furnished, though it smelt uncommonly damp, and was too full of smoke to allow of any details being clearly discerned, beyond the fact that there was no window, and that the walls were plentifully hung with those pictures of the undraped female form which may be frequently encountered in the less obscene pages of some of the low-class French periodicals. Some of the men touched their hats to Radley as he entered, but they eyed Stein uncertainly; one hand travelled to a hip pocket, a movement not altogether lost on the thin-lipped Jew.

It was obvious that he was about to speak when Radley suddenly remarked:

“Not quite such pleasant surroundings as

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headquarters, eh, Mr. Stein?"—laying particular stress on the last word. The men, mostly unconcerned hitherto, instantly straightened to their feet. A chair was overturned, and fell to the floor with a crash in the queer silence which followed this remark. Yet the silence had not been altogether complete, for one of the men had hissed: "The Chief!"

Stein whipped around on the assembled company.

"Ah, so you know me at last, you car-rion!" he snarled. "You may not have met me before, but I recognise all of you. Carl Svenson, the gallows bird; Bash Williams; and you too, Neile, the slayer. Nice little crowd, aren't you? So you didn't recall me except by name, eh? Well, take a good look now."

His companion raised a huge hand.

"Aw—cut it out, Stein," interjected Radley impatiently.

"One word more from you," was the quick reply, "and I'll drop you in your tracks. But we waste time. Business, gentlemen. Draw up your chairs and we can proceed." So saying, he advanced to the table, swung round a chair, and plumped himself down at the head.

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He looked up.

"In the first place, is all ready for the landing to-night? Are the three cars at the usual place?"

Radley nodded.

"They will be here at three, and are due to call at the White House at about half-past. One is for London, one will make for the North, and the other——"

"Yes, I know all that," interrupted Stein quietly; "you are merely repeating my orders."

Then he turned to the listening men.

"Who's the latest from London?" he demanded.

"I am," said Neile.

"Is the house in Hampstead prepared?"

Neile seemed ill at ease, and eyed the other fearfully.

"Awl right."

Something in the man's voice infuriated Stein.

"What in hell's name's the matter?" he screamed. "You're hedging. No, don't dare to deny it. How did you get down here in the first place?"

"Why, I motored down, didn't I?" replied Neile, appealing to the members present for confirmation.

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“ Alone ? ”

“ Yes.” The murder was out. “ Number Twenty-three was arrested to-night—at about seven o’clock.”

Stein swung round on him with a snarl.

“ Then how do you account for the fact that I was speaking to him half an hour ago ? ” he sneered.

There followed a short pause.

“ Strikes me there might be two,” suggested the Swede, Carl.

“ My oath ! I believe he may be right ! ” shouted Radley, making for the door. “ And the Lord only knows what damage he’s done already.”

In the silence that followed the whirlwind departure, the men heard the roar of a motor-car engine starting up, and then the sounds faded out as it moved on and raced off into the night.

CHAPTER XXV

CARSTAIRS not even to this day has any clear indication as to how long he remained utterly unconscious of his surroundings, and the people who moved about him. And, although it actually can only have been a few minutes, he would probably have sworn to an infinitely longer period. However, evidence goes to show that this was not the case, and that he actually opened his eyes after a very short interval. His head still reeled, but, whatever he felt now, it was a remarkably quick recovery, and may have been due to a miscalculation of the sandbagger or the considerable thickness of his skull.

He soon saw that he lay in a low stone building, almost at the water's edge. One small window pierced the wall on the farther side, whilst a narrow doorway, totally innocent of a corresponding door, appeared to be the only means of entrance.

Dragging himself to a sitting position—for his wrists and ankles had been left free—he rested his aching head against the cool stonework behind him.

He had had a pretty rough time of it that

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evening, but the fighting spirit was far from being dead. Indeed, he felt almost elated when he counted the odds which he was undoubtedly still left to face—alone. For somehow he felt that he could hardly look on that poor cripple girl again as even a possible ally.

Presently he became conscious of voices ; a steady murmur was coming from almost at his elbow. Twisting his head, slowly and painfully, he found the explanation.

A light flashed from the far side of a canvas partition, which he could almost touch by thrusting out a hand, and it was from the other side of this that the voices were speaking.

The building in which he lay was, indeed, only a structure of roof and walls alone, simply a shell, but to subdivide it a curtain had been erected, and it was behind this that he now lay. Crawling to the side, he peered through a rent in the fabric.

Two men sat in the far room. A shaded reading-lamp, standing on a round table between them, threw a dim light on their features. A thick-set figure, who lounged with his back towards him, was now talking, and, from the fact that they had apparently just settled in their seats, Carstairs deduced that they had recently entered. The other man, on whom the light shone fully, was the

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individual in whom he had trusted, and whom he had known by the name of Twysden.

"Filthy night," growled the speaker, pulling a bottle across the table and splashing some spirit into a glass at his elbow. "Drink?"

The other shook his head.

"Thanks, no," said Number Twenty-three.

The first speaker threw himself back into his chair luxuriously, and drew steadily at a long black cigar.

"We've completed the first trip," he said presently, "and now we're standing by for the Chief. You're from London, I take it. Don't you run the Hampstead dump?"

Number Twenty-three nodded. "Yes, and stand by down here as I'm wanted."

"Ah, I heard that there was some arrangement of the sort. Then you'll never have met Stein or any of the Chief's specialities before to-night?"

"No," was the reply, "but you said you expected them down here again, didn't you?"

"Aw, yes, they've gone to the dépôt in Brenport, to settle up about the cars, I expect. I rather fancy they'll be coming out on the next trip to the *Tcheka Russe* themselves."

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This was bad news to Carstairs, hidden behind the thin canvas partition. These men would be difficult enough to deal with, but Stein and that devil Radley might prove to be too much of an entertainment.

But there was one thing.

An hour or two ago, the mention of these mysterious "trips" the men in the next room referred to, would have left him amazed and totally in the dark.

But now he understood, for the sight that had so stunned him when he had emerged on to the ledge through the cupboard-back, the spectacle which had impressed him so much as to cause him to throw caution to the winds and, forgetting all else, to clamber down on that expedition into the cavern, had been nothing more nor less than the vision of a sleek black body which even now lay rising and falling to the slight movement of the swell in the oily water of the tidal pool.

As he had looked, the great beast had emerged from the depths of the sea, and a hatch in the conning-tower had risen to disembark a dark figure. For a submarine now lay in the basin, moored alongside the wall, and the figure who had landed was the speaker of the moment—the man who now sat

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in conversation with the other, who Carstairs now knew was Number Twenty-three.

“When do you expect them back?” demanded the latter.

“Oh, in an hour or so,” was the answer. “We usually like to get the last run over before dawn—not that there’s any chance of being spotted. The naval manoeuvres usually make it a bit more lively, but, even then, there’s not the merest shadow of a risk. Trust Stein for that. But, all the same, mark you, this will be the first time that I’ve ever clapped eyes on him. He’s a close one, is the Chief, and God alone knows where he lives. Anyhow, it’s queer about to-day; he seems to have scented danger somewhere, and he was right too; there has been some trouble, weren’t you sayin’?”

Number Twenty-three nodded.

“Yes,” he said, “you’re right there, but just a tramp and another little visitor—a naval officer.”

“Oh, yes, and what happened to them?”

“One’s dead—got shot up in a rough-and-tumble on the way down here, I was told. I fancy he’s in the cellar. They sent Cleaver to have a look at him. But the fact is, we got rather tied up by that damned officer knocking around.”

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“ Oh, how’s that ? ”

“ Well, to be quite candid, he managed to find his way down as far as the cave, and as far as this hut, in fact.”

The other whistled.

“ H’m. He must be a bit of a hustler. But how did he come to be hanging around in the first place ? ”

Number Twenty-three considered.

“ I’m not quite certain yet, though it doesn’t matter much now.” He paused. “ I suppose he happened to be hanging around on the Cliffs, and broke in for shelter during the storm. I don’t think he can have had any suspicion of the place ; anyhow, I can’t think of any other explanation for his entry, save just common or garden bad luck,” he concluded.

“ Yep, p’raps you’re right,” admitted the other ; but the statement just made by Number Twenty-three, untrue in almost every word as it was, left Carstairs guessing at the necessity for the obvious falsehood.

The man had told a clumsy and unreasonable lie—a similar one, Carstairs imagined, to the first which he had possibly told Stein in explaining away his presence.

Twysden he now looked on as an utter

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mystery, if only for his movements of this evening. Firstly, because he was certain now that the other had some appointment to keep at this house on the headland ; and secondly, because he was sure that Twysden had tried to escape from him on the rocks in Fisherman's Cove.

He studied the two men carefully round the side of the canvas screen. Twysden—Number Twenty-three—was facing him, and still wore the black half-mask. Carstairs gazed at him carelessly, and then quite suddenly he noticed the flash of the man's dark eyes behind the tight-drawn band of silk, and immediately, in this broad-shouldered figure, he satisfied himself that he had recognised the avenger on the Cliffs.

The fancy seemed to go to his head and affect his capacity for thought like strong drink, but by and by he pulled himself together and listened again.

They were still talking, and about him, and as he waited he heard Number Twenty-three laugh unpleasantly.

" Goodness knows. That's up to the Chief to decide."

Then the other man interrupted.

" He'll find it more difficult to deal with the officer than the others. There'll be the very

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devil of a song and dance if they find his body."

Number Twenty-three gave vent to an exclamation of impatience.

"It's up to the Chief to see that it never is found," he snarled.

The other nodded grimly. "I think I understand, but where did you say he is now?"

Number Twenty-three nodded across the room.

"Behind the curtain," he answered.

There followed a short pause.

Suddenly a bell started ringing outside the hut.

"My God, what's that?" cried the last speaker, springing to his feet, overthrowing his chair in so doing. The other man had already started up, and now disappeared through the door.

He had hardly been gone a minute, however, before Twenty-three, looking about him fearfully, stealthily moved towards the curtain. Carstairs, sensing his danger, dropped back into his former comatose position. Silently the man crept across the space, and his hand was almost on the canvas, when a cry from outside made him dash to the doorway and look out.

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"Somebody's up in the house," shouted a frenzied voice. "That was the alarm bell from the tower-room. All the gang's aboard, so it must be a stranger. Come on."

With a backward glance which made Carstairs shudder, Number Twenty-three sprang out.

CHAPTER XXVI

CARSTAIRS breathed a sigh of relief when he saw his two enemies depart. They had been a queer pair, and on more than one occasion, during their recent conversation, he had noticed a look of suspicion shoot across the face of Number Twenty-three. The other he had assumed to be the sea-going captain of the submarine boat. Next he came to wondering where he had heard the mention of the *Tcheka Russe*.

The remark about the manœuvres was, of course, quite true, for everything would be quite quiet at sea now, at least as far as the Navy was concerned.

Most of the ships of the Atlantic Fleet were in their own home ports, giving leave.

Shakily he tottered to his feet. Something had to be done, and that quickly. It would have given him infinite satisfaction to have got his hands on that devil Twysden, Number Twenty-three. But now he had to consider the whole position, and that did not lead him any closer to the truth.

What was the next move?

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Hand to head he stood, swaying drunkenly in the dim light. God, if he could only think !

Things began to spin around. He clawed at the wall for support, and came nearer to falling. The place was heaving before his eyes. The world seemed to have taken up a slant ; he felt himself dropping. Then he became conscious of a soft voice which said :

“ Steady on, old boy.” A pair of strong young arms had eased him into a sitting position, then came a faint scent of violets, and a vision of hair—old-gold-coloured hair—which brushed his cheek.

When he opened his eyes again he found Anne, the little tramp girl, kneeling by his side, peering anxiously into his face. For a moment he was afraid that he dreamed, but the vision was quite material, and she smiled at him as he laid back.

“ Feeling better ? ”

Carstairs groaned. “ Oh, yes, I suppose so, only for the Lord’s sake don’t ask me to do any more to-night.” For he distinctly remembered the last words she had spoken, and the suggestion that he was going to prove useful.

“ Well, that’s just what you’ve got to do. Do you feel strong enough to stand up ? ”

He groaned again.

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"Well, have another shot in a moment. We've got a few minutes before they return from the tower-room."

"H'm. And what do you expect of me when they do come back?" he demanded.

"I don't quite know," answered the girl.

Carstairs grunted.

"I don't care much if I never move again."

"Well, you won't if you can't think of something before the skipper of the boat returns," were her next words.

"You are a little ray of sunshine, aren't you?" And then he continued, not waiting for her answer: "But tell me,—" he gazed fixedly into the depths of her grey eyes. "Who are you?"

"Do you really want to know? You can call me Anne if you like."

"Forward minx! No, I didn't mean that. What I really wanted, was to find out what in the world you're doing in this perishing place."

But the girl didn't answer. Lazily she stretched up to her full height and regarded her tiny feet, which were now bare. The boot of her deformity was gone, and he immediately saw that her feet were quite normal.

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Carstairs sprang up, quite forgetting his sore head. He grasped the girl roughly by the arm and swung her round to face him.

"Is this a new trick?" he demanded.

"No," was the answer. "I have never been forced to wear that dreadful boot until quite lately. But why? What do you care?"

"Care? Oh, Lord! That's a good one."

She looked up at him fearfully, and then turned her face away as if to hide the expression which had crept into her eyes.

"And why do you stare at me so?"

"Am I staring at you? Tell me, do you believe in love at first sight?"

The girl looked up at him quickly again. There must have been nearly a foot's difference in height, and it was difficult to see his face in the dim light.

Presently she drew away from him.

"Please don't talk like that now. We must do something."

Carstairs scratched his head, and seemed about to speak when, suddenly, there came a shout across the cavern.

"MacCartney!" called a gruff voice.

They were being hailed from the submarine.

Instinctively the girl ran to Carstairs.

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Dragging Anne back into the shadows, they waited.

"MacCartney!" came the cry again.

Presently there was the scrape of sea-boots grating on the metal deck of the boat. Cautiously the figure trod along the gangway to the shore and approached the hut.

Carstairs, now apparently quite recovered, awaited him.

Nearer and nearer came the steps; presently they rang on the rock just outside. A shadow fell across the threshold, and a figure stepped in, peering around.

He had been standing there perhaps a second or two before he became fully aware that anything was wrong. But then it was too late.

A muscular arm suddenly wound itself round his neck from behind, and a hand was thrust over his mouth. Then came the pressure of a knee in the small of his back, and the man felt himself crumple up. Something seemed to snap.

No sound he uttered before he was brought to the ground, where he lay unconscious and inert.

"Come along," ordered Carstairs, turning suddenly to Anne. "There's not a second to be lost."

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First he slipped off the man's boots, with the woollen suit he was wearing, and then deftly gagged and bound him.

Carstairs quickly wriggled into the thick clothing, and then, gripping the girl by the arm, ran to the door and hustled her through.

"Listen! What's that noise?" she demanded, hesitating at the threshold with one finger raised and her pretty head tilted to one side, all attention.

"Sounds like a dynamo," he whispered. "They must have one stowed away here somewhere, for the lighting circuits, and for the running of a ventilation supply, perhaps. But never mind now. Quick, Anne, we must get to the boat. It's the only way out."

"But that's useless," she remonstrated. "The men won't obey you; they'd simply knock you out again."

He laughed grimly.

"Oh, I'm trusting to luck about that. Anyhow, I think I can fake up some sort of voice when I'm talking. Everything's a gamble."

"But they'll see you."

"No, I don't think so. We'll stick to the conning-tower, and I'll give my orders

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by voice-pipe. Anyway, I'll have a shot at passing myself off as Stein. They've never seen their Chief."

"Well, even now, how shall we manage? The captain's ashore."

"I'm taking charge this trip," he reminded her. "Come along. I happen to belong to the submarine service. It won't be the first time I've been down."

He turned to her quickly.

"Are you prepared to risk it?"

Apparently she had already made up her mind, for she did not long keep him in suspense.

She spoke no word, but answered him by moving to his side and pressing her lips impulsively on the rough surface of his sleeve.

Quickly, and hand in hand, they ran along the rocky shelf, and so to the gangway and aboard. Carstairs stepped forward on the sloping deck to make sure that the hatches were tight, and then handed the girl down into the conning-tower. The narrow plank to the shore he kicked off the boat's side into the water. Next he himself clambered down.

"Submerge!" was his muffled order, as the door closed down with a ringing clang.

Just at that moment came a shout from the shore. Cleaver and the captain, MacCartney,

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stood on the shelf which led to the cellar cupboard. Swiftly they clambered down the swinging rope ladder, but they were too late. Barely had their feet touched the bottom before the submarine boat settled down gradually, water lapped the turtle deck, she dived, and left but an ever-widening ring of wavelets to show that she had, indeed, ever existed.

CHAPTER XXVII

I

CARSTAIRS' first sight of the interior of the submarine's conning-tower came as something of a shock to him ; for the glance from the turtle deck above had shown a shallow air-lock, and then a deep, unfamiliar compartment, roughly circular in shape.

A man had been standing below, and, looking up, had met Carstairs' anxious eyes as he peered into the depths of the unknown craft. It was to him that the naval officer had given his order and, as the oval watertight hatch closed with a dull clang behind him, he realised that his first command had been carried through without question.

The boat was of a design with which he was totally unfamiliar, and, although there were many details with which he was vaguely conversant, his former hope of being able to take charge immediately was instantly shattered, but there was an undoubted part for him to play, and now he trusted solely on his ability of passing himself off as the Chief, Stein.

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Anne, who had preceded him, he gruffly ordered into a corner, and then turned to the only other occupant of the tower, who was standing by a small spoked wheel, with a number of switches and levers close at hand.

Carstairs instantly recognised in him the coxswain of the boat, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness that he was at his station, for he was forced to admit to himself that, despite his complete technical knowledge of British under-water craft, the one he now stood in was a mass of intricacies, for half of whose number he would scarcely have been able to find a name.

The fact that the man at the wheel accepted him, and appeared to take his presence for granted, did not strike him forcibly until later, and it was only then he realised that he had struck off the appointed time for the boat's second trip, almost to the minute. The crew was actually on board, ready and waiting, and the coxswain had been expecting the mysterious Chief to appear at any moment for the cruise.

Carstairs' move had been a colossal gamble, and he had won the first trick ; he was quite willing now to stand back, prepared for what fate would provide.

It was true that he was deeply concerned about Anne's safety still, but he realised that

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another minute wasted in the great cavern might have proved to have been their last. Stein's crowd, undeceived, were slayers: Death would have awaited further inaction.

As he stood there undecided, with these emotions running through his quick brain, he became conscious that the boat was sinking. Water was already hissing into the ballast-tanks underfoot, and the coxswain was peering across at a narrow panel switch-board, on which a set of gauge needles were quivering.

The operation of diving was quickly performed, and, while the wheel was spun over and the boat's head turned, Carstairs glanced quickly round this compartment of their submarine prison.

The space they occupied was approximately twelve feet square, the bulkheads being rounded to the form of the ship on the out-board sides. The fore and aft walls were slightly concave, and each was pierced by a narrow slip of a watertight door, providing a gangway, which actually ran the whole length of the boat.

These were now clipped shut, secured by stout steel dogs, and thus partitioned the engine-room off from the navigating compartment, in which the wheel and compass were situated.

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Against the boat's side stood a mass of electric leads, a collection of bright switches, and, amidships, a gyro compass, glistening with brasswork, now spinning at a terrific rate, and emitting a steady drone.

The sensation of sinking presently ceased, and then the coxswain spun the wheel over again.

He passed a gruff order, and immediately the boat shivered from stem to stern, then proceeded to glide swiftly forward.

To the listeners in the conning-tower came the deep-set vibration of the main driving motors, revolving at a high velocity.

Carstairs looked quickly about him, and then, with his eyes on the plate-glass windows set in the upper surface of the dome-topped compartment, he uttered a sharp cry of amazement. He moved closer and peered through keenly.

A dial close at hand indicated that the submarine had submerged to a depth of about five metres. Now they were moving forward, well below the surface of the cavern pool, shaping a course roughly due east.

It was obvious to Carstairs that at that moment they must be actually diving under the line of the cliffs, and he instantly saw that his theory would explain the queer sight which met his gaze.

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The boat was running through a narrow submarine channel, whose rocky walls seemed about to close in and crush the frail craft between its dark and gleaming sides. At intervals of a few feet the tunnel was brightly illuminated by sunken lamps, whose light shone through the tower's observation-panes with a glint of opalescent green.

Every now and then would come the flash of a suddenly startled fish, and the gleam of glistening strands of weeds, which dragged dead hands across the deck above and clung to the sides, as if desirous of anchoring her to the great cliff, to share their dim solitude.

Carstairs looked quickly away from this amazing spectacle, and met the anxious eyes of Anne, who still crouched in the corner where he had left her.

He smiled at her covertly, and after a moment he strode across the compartment.

He bent over her.

"Cheer up, little girl," he managed to whisper above the roar of the engines. "We've just dived under the cliff from the bottom of the pool, and by now we ought to have reached the open sea. Feeling a little happier?"

She nodded weakly.

Carstairs glanced at the coxswain, made

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certain that he was still busy with the navigation, then looked back and stooped over her again.

"We've had the most amazing luck," he continued. "I can hardly believe anything yet, and, although we aren't quite out of the wood, we must be half-way at least."

She smiled wanly at his metaphor, and struggled into a sitting position.

"Where are we going, do you think?" she demanded anxiously.

Carstairs shrugged his shoulders.

"I'm not positive, mark you," came his faint answer, "but I rather fancy that we're making for a ship out in the bay, off Fisher-man's Cove. I heard the captain talking about a ship called the *Tcheka Russe*, and, now I come to think of it, I've remembered that that was the name of the yacht which has been lying close inshore for a day or two. I nearly managed to make out her tally to-day through a telescope, though I couldn't be quite certain; but now I'm sure."

Anne glanced up hopefully.

"I think you're right," she murmured.

They lapsed into silence for a moment, but presently he spoke again.

"How did you come to get mixed up in this business?" he asked.

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She looked away from him, and avoided his questioning eyes.

"It was because of an oath," she admitted at length, and for a moment a fanatical light flashed in her soft eyes. "My father was murdered, and it was Stein's gang which killed him. Both my father and I have been mixed up with them for months, and eventually they found that he was an enemy—a dangerous one too. Oh, it's a long story, but at last they hunted him down. They managed to prove that he was in with the C.I.D., and—killed him."

She shuddered involuntarily, but presently Carstairs stooped and tilted back her face, so that he could peer into the depths of her eyes.

"By heaven," he said, "then you're——"

But she interrupted him.

"The daughter of the man you found on the Cliffs to-day. Anne Denbigh."

Carstairs started back, with a sudden exclamation.

"God! How awful!"

A mist of tears was blinding her, and quickly she turned away.

For a moment he stood irresolute, then suddenly there came a new sound, which told him they were entering into the final phase

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of their journey. For from the adjacent compartment forward had come the roar of the tank discharge pumps.

He glanced up at the plate-glass observation slits, and saw that the rushing waters outside now showed dark and indeterminable. From the dials close at hand he could see they were still at a considerable depth, but now gradually rising.

Finally he crossed to the centre of the compartment, and stood beside the man at the wheel. Ever since they had set out he had kept his ears open, and his active brain had already taken in most of the knowledge necessary for handling the submarine boat.

From the orders passed, and the indicators at his side, he had deduced the number and spacing of the ballast-tanks, and the technique required for handling the strange horizontal and vertical rudders.

By the fact that the coxswain had discharged some of the midship tanks Carstairs imagined they must be nearing the *Tcheka Russe*, which he now realised was their certain destination. A new phase was about to open out, and for the safety of the trusting girl, and Smith, whom he had left in danger in the house on the headland, it was time to act.

Anne, who had sat up again, alert and fearless, suddenly saw Carstairs snatch up a

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heavy spanner, muffle it in the folds of a thick oily cloth, and then bring the weapon down with a swinging crash on to the coxswain's defenceless head.

For the moment she was afraid that he had taken leave of his senses, but, when she saw his next action, she immediately recognised the meaning of his desperate plan, and watched him with wondering eyes.

As the coxswain fell unconscious to the deck, automatically releasing the controls, the submarine gave a sickening roll, and seemed to dive suddenly by the bow. At that moment there came a new note from the engines, and the lights began to grow dim.

Yet, almost instantaneously it seemed, Carstairs had swept the senseless man to one side, and assumed his place in the manœuvring position. His intention was obvious, and, although he inwardly doubted the possibility of navigating the boat round the shore to the Brenport coastguard station, the forlorn hope which he had taken up was the final stake before the end.

Anne watched him, transfixed, as he handled the strange vessel, while they slid on through the night.

They were rising still, and presently they took on a slight pitching movement from the heaving waters at the surface. From time

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to time he would pass gruff orders, in imitation of the voice of the unconscious coxswain, and presently, just as Anne felt the speed diminishing, the boat rose up through a tearing wave-crest into the open air once more.

“Quick,” whispered Carstairs, without glancing round; “we’ve broken surface. Tell me if you can see the yacht lying off anywhere close.”

Anne darted across to the thick panes and looked eagerly round. Presently:

“Yes, she’s over there on the right, and still some distance away. It’s foggy, but I can just make out her hull, I think, under it.”

Carstairs nodded grimly, and then turned the ship’s head to port, and steered blindly into the teeth of the north wind.

2

The *Termagant*, H.M. destroyer, on passage from the North to Chatham, was feeling her way uneasily around the Suffolk coast. It was shortly after midnight, the watch had just changed, and in the fore part of the bridge, muffled up to the eyes in a gleaming oilskin, was the sub-lieutenant.

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The strong wind, which hummed a stormy tune on the signal halyards above, was bitterly cold and already beginning to disperse the dank wisps of swirling sea-fog which hung over the surface of the water. At the wheel, his face dimly illuminated by the compass lamp before him, was the quartermaster, who stood motionless, except when on occasion he spun over a spoke and turned the ship up on to her southerly course.

They had just passed a coasting steamer, a gleam of lights, rolling heavily to the restless North Sea swell; but now they were apparently on a lonely expanse of water, with a high gloom of cliffs banking up on the coast-line to starboard. The thunder of surf on the rocks was just distinguishable.

Presently there came the sound of a heavy tread on the bridge ladder, and a moment later a tall figure emerged into the shaded lamplight, and strode forward to the spray screens.

The captain glanced quickly at the vague shape of the officer of the watch, and then peered into the darkness which enshrouded the coast.

He listened intently.

“Rather close in shore, aren’t we, sub.?”

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Those breakers sound uncomfortably near. Let's have a look at our position."

The officer addressed moved quickly across to the chart-table, and switched up the lamp.

He indicated a spot on a thin pencilled line with the point of the dividers.

"We're just here, sir, and being set slightly to the west, but it's deep water still." He looked closer to distinguish the small printed depth.

"Fifteen fathoms, and we shall be steadily running into deeper water."

He waited, and then turned to the captain.

"Shall I alter out, sir?"

But the captain's answer was drowned by the sudden hail of the look-out man almost at their side.

"Light on the port bow, sir."

He walked forward and studied it through his night-glasses.

"It's the riding lamp of a yacht at anchor, I think. What do you make of it, sub.?"

The other had been peering forward for some moments.

"It's a single-funnelled private yacht," he decided eventually. "Painted black. It's too foggy to make out——"

"Light right ahead, sir," came a sudden hail which interrupted his speech.

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There was a shout from the sub-lieutenant, and the captain's eyes followed the direction of his outstretched arm; then he swung round to the quartermaster.

Directly under their bows, almost, had glimmered the faint light from a raised tower on a dark turtle deck.

"Hard a port," he ordered, and then turned to the officer of the watch.

"Full speed astern both."

There followed the sudden clang of the engine-room telegraphs, and almost immediately the shriek of the turbines as they slowed down and then thunderously reversed.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE dining-room in the House of Darkness was empty. The only movement was provided by the draught, which filtered in through the chinks around the French windows and stirred the white curtains. A fine rain pattered against the glass, and from somewhere there came the faint whisper of voices. . . .

Presently, however, a figure appeared at the sliding panel, which stood open; and then another; yet again a third, he being masked and carrying a thin-barrelled, evil-looking gun, which was pointed full into the small of the back of the man who preceded him.

On stepping out into the room, the latter dispensed with Cleaver, who had been the first to appear, and directed him to remain on guard in the hall; then, with the third man, the badly scared Smith, he moved upstairs.

Around the first floor ran a gallery, off which several rooms were seen to open, and Smith was ordered up to one of the doors. He swung it back, and they passed through.

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Instead of entering an apartment, however, he found that they were now faced by a long, dark corridor, which gave in turn on to a narrow stairway, up which he was eventually forced to climb.

He obeyed without question, though unwillingly enough.

At the top of this flight another door stood open, and a dim light burnt in the room beyond.

They moved in together.

"Now we can talk," said the masked man, half closing the door behind him as they entered. "I think I know who you are already, but let's hear what you've got to say, and exactly what you're after. We have no witnesses, so fire ahead."

So saying, he laid the pistol down on the table before which he was now seated, and threw himself into an attitude both to listen for movement in the house, and to anything that Smith might have to say.

But, to begin with, the other was silent. Indeed, they both seemed to await something from the rooms beneath them.

Suddenly the reporter looked across. "That's a nasty-looking weapon, partner," he said.

"Yes," agreed the seated man, "it is,

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although it's only a common or garden air pistol."

"Um. And what may be the particular advantage of that form of aggression?" demanded Smith.

The masked man looked over towards the shuttered windows before he spoke ; but when he turned again his mouth was twisted into a grim smile.

"They happen to kill—silently," was the answer.

"Oh, holy gee," groaned Smith.

Then followed a silence.

The room which they now occupied was a high-roofed apartment, with a cone-shaped ceiling. It had a circular wall, and the windows, now closed and shuttered, were spaced at equal intervals around it. Smith judged that they must now be occupying a tower-room, and his supposition was correct.

In the centre stood a table, at which the masked man sat. But, besides this article of furniture and an odd chair or two, the place was practically empty. Perhaps the most interesting object in the room was a thin polished cylinder, beneath which was mounted a pair of high-power binoculars. The tube was fitted so as to project through the wall on the seaward side, and the glasses

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could be focused through a small aperture, which was provided just beneath.

Smith stepped forward to examine the piece of apparatus, which was connected to a switchboard on one side of the room, but he was startled by a sudden command from the man at the table.

"Stand back," he ordered.

Smith meekly withdrew his gaze. For a moment he seemed to be deliberating over something, then he stepped over to the table and stood facing the other.

"You asked me who I was a few minutes back, and I don't quite see why you shouldn't know. It's not so very mysterious after all."

The man behind the mask, toying with the pistol, looked up sharply as the other spoke.

There was a pause.

"Well——"

"Well, as I was telling the young chap who got caught up in the cupboard——"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"I'll explain. It's like this. The young chap—quite a nice-looking young gent—vanished in a cupboard in the cellar."

"In the cellar?"

"Yes, only a few minutes ago actually."

"Right. Go on; you can explain all that later."

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Smith nodded impatiently.

" Well, I told him I was a reporter—that's true enough ; but I also told him I was on vacation down here—that's a lie. I was definitely put into this job by a certain somebody."

The man in the mask rounded on him in a flash.

" Who, by heaven ? "

" I'm sorry I can't slip you the information just yet, but it's a fact nevertheless. Somebody guessed that there was going to be a frame-up here this evening, and I was on to it. I was warned that it might be a risky job, and that's been genuine enough so far. I've met one corpse which wasn't a corpse, and which walked off by itself, two guns, one masked man, one likely young chap who does the Maskelyne trick solo in the cupboard, a sliding panel, and this room with a brass gadget, like a telescope gone wrong."

" Very interesting indeed," interrupted the other. " You've been very patient all the evening, no doubt. But, as it so happens, I'm inclined to believe every word you've told me."

Smith bowed ironically.

" And from it," continued the man behind the mask, " I gather that we're fighting on

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the same side, and, although you obviously haven't realised it, we've met before."

"Holy gee!" ejaculated the reporter.

"Yes, we have met before, and that was this very evening."

"Then you leave me guessing," retorted Smith. "Seen you before, and this very evening!" he repeated incredulously.

He paused for a moment. Then:

"Um! Perhaps you're right," he conceded grudgingly. "But now there are one or two other things that are worrying me badly. Firstly, there's the young chap who disappeared."

The other nodded slowly.

"Yes, you're right enough there. This is a very queer business, and I don't see the end of it yet. But, to begin with, how much do *you* know about it?"

"More than you guess, I dare say. I told you I worked on a newspaper? Very well. I do the sensational columns, and some months ago I got interested in the disappearance of a man called Denbigh."

He saw the other start.

"Know him?"

The man in the mask nodded.

"Yes, slightly. Go on."

"Well, I gave a bit of time to the case,

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and eventually managed to prove to my satisfaction that the man belonged to the C.I.D. ; but that was not all. Denbigh disappeared in July ; it was actually during the first week in August that the final trace of him was lost."

The other nodded again.

"Very well," continued Smith eagerly, "it might interest you to know that he was seen, in the flesh, alive and well, as late as last September."

"Impossible ! "

Smith spread out his hands in a gesture of indifference.

"As you like," he said, "but it's not so impossible as you think." He fumbled for a moment in an inside pocket, and eventually drew out a flat case. "I have proofs, and this is one."

He handed it across the table.

"Inside you'll find a photograph of the man in question. It was taken three months ago in a Norwegian coasting steamer."

The other snatched it up, and peered at the likeness incredulously.

There followed a short, hesitating pause, then he handed it back with a faint shrug.

"Not very conclusive, Smith," he argued. "It's the man right enough, I'm ready to

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admit, but that snap may be years old, for all we know."

But the other shook his head.

"You're wrong again," he insisted. "I happen to know that that photograph was taken in September for certain."

He rested his hands on the table, and leant forward across it.

"I tell you I'm positive, for I happen to have taken it myself!"

The seated man brought his fist down with a crash on to the table before him.

"You're lying," he cried. "This story of yours is incredible."

Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said quietly, picking up the photograph-case and returning it to his pocket. "You may think what you like. I have no particular object in trying to delude you, remember that. But, all the same, what I have told you to-night I swear to be absolutely true."

The other shook his head.

"It's incredible," he repeated.

But Smith leant across impulsively again.

"Not so unlikely as you seem to think," he insisted. "I met him during my last holiday, on the boat coming home from Oslo. That was where that group was taken."

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He promised to see me again when we reached England, but he never kept his word, and I knew, even then, that he was mixed up in some queer business."

He hesitated.

"Denbigh took me into his confidence for some unknown reason, and handed over a packet which I was to keep until I heard of his death." Smith laughed grimly. "That was a queer notion of his own," he added.

"However, amongst other things he gave me the impression that he was a detective, employed on a dangerous job, the nature of which he only hinted at. He told me that he had disappeared from England provisionally, and warned me that he wanted a friend, somebody to confide in."

"And he chose you?"

"Apparently, yes. I happened to be on the spot, you see. Before we reached London he told me of another man on the job, a man called Blake." He paused suddenly. "Did you say anything?"

"No, go on."

"Well, as I said, I have never had a word from him since then. But yesterday I received a note from this man Blake, which told me that I should obtain further news of Denbigh if I came down here."

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The other nodded slowly.

"May I see that message?" he asked.

Smith dived his hand into an inner pocket and produced a crumpled sheet of paper.

"Certainly. Here it is."

The seated man smoothed the missive out, and slowly read the printed words.

Presently he looked up, and tapped the note with his forefinger.

"Very interesting," he smiled, "but this happens to be a rank forgery."

Smith started back a pace.

"What the devil do you mean?" he cried.

The other rose to his full height, and snatched off the satin mask.

"Exactly what I said," came the steady voice. "That message is a forgery, and was never written by the man with that signature."

He looked across at Smith, and his eyes glittered in the cold light.

"There must be an oversight somewhere. I am Blake!"

Smith's hand sought his trembling mouth.

"Holy gee! This looks like a—a joke."

But the other shook his head.

"It appears to me more to approach a trap," he said.

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“ Holy gee ! ” repeated Smith.

There followed a long silence.

“ But what about Denbigh ? ” asked the reporter. “ Don’t you know anything about him ? ”

Blake nodded.

“ Yes,” he said, “ I do, so you needn’t be disappointed about that part of the message.”

He hesitated dramatically.

“ Denbigh is dead.”

Smith remained speechless, but presently mastered himself, and asked a sudden question.

“ Now, look here,” he said, “ I reckon I’m taking too much on trust from you. How is it that you’ve got such a grip on the case—find your way about the house ? Why, you even seem to know these fellows by sight. How do you explain that, if you’ve never seen any of them before ? ”

“ Easy enough,” came the answer. “ It happens to be my job. I recognised Cleaver, luckily, from his photograph. That particular gentleman is rather a popular character ; he happens to be ‘ wanted ’ in three countries. As for——”

He paused ; they both waited in a listening attitude.

“ Did you hear anything ? ”

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Smith, now more at his ease, tiptoed over to the threshold, but the only sound to be heard was the patter of the rain, and the moaning of the wind as it howled around the room in the tower.

“Gosh, this place gives me the creeps,” he whispered; but the other had crossed to the windows, and opened one on the seaward side, throwing back the shutters, and had not heard him.

The wind was blowing off the land, and so the rain was not admitted. He stood peering out into the darkness.

Smith silently closed the door.

Presently a voice called to him from the window.

“Can you make out anything—there, over the water?”

Smith crossed to his side and peered out intently.

“No, I shouldn’t be telling the truth if I said that I did.” For it was misty, and, although the wind was dropping slightly, and the storm had abated, there still remained a gloomy and overcast condition over the sea.

“H’m. Thought I saw a flash—over there”—he pointed out into the night—“but perhaps I was mistaken.”

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And then, turning to the room again, he saw the closed door.

He swung round on Smith in a sudden fury.

"Did you do that?" he demanded.

"Yes," was the cheerful answer.

"You don't realise what you've done, I suppose? But do you see those wires leading down to the lintel? Well, I rather fancy that that'll be some form of alarm. This means trouble probably. Are you armed?"

"Nope."

Blake took up his gun, and balanced it in his hand.

Suddenly there came the thunder of flying feet on the staircase below, a loud voice shouted something indistinct, and then the door burst open.

On the threshold stood Number Twenty-three!

CHAPTER XXIX

FOR a moment there was complete silence.

Smith, with his favourite weapon—a chair—poised above his head, looked from one to the other of the two men. But the newcomer did not move; the man whom he now knew as Blake failed to use his gun.

Then, suddenly, Number Twenty-three stepped into the room.

“Thank heaven you’re safe, Blake,” he almost shouted. “I’ve just been told that you were dead, and I was fearing the worst. I couldn’t manage to get away from the cave under the cellars a second before; that alarm was a stroke of genuine providence, almost.”

He swung round.

“Who’s this?” he demanded.

“Smith, of the *Daily Gazette*,” came that worthy’s answer. “Glad to meet you, sir.”

And gravely they shook hands.

“Now look here, Twysden,” interposed Blake, “there’s no time to be lost. We’ve got to make some definite move, and do a bit of thinking, too. The sudden appearance of

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Stein on the scene has upset everything, and I can't help thinking that the man must somehow have got a hint of this evening's raid. I'm certain he wasn't expected here before midnight, and yet he actually put in an appearance at about nine."

Twysden nodded quickly.

"You're right," he said. "He's playing a pretty deep game, and I don't altogether like the way things are shaping."

"One moment," interrupted Smith. "I must admit to being in the dark pretty thoroughly, but, if you'd just tell me where we stand, perhaps I might be able to help."

Blake moved uneasily, but presently he looked up into the reporter's eager face.

He hesitated. Then :

"That's fair enough," he admitted, "and, as you say, perhaps you can help. I think we have a few minutes to spare, so I'll give you a rough idea of how we stand."

Smith bowed.

"You have already gathered that we're all involved in a pretty big thing," began Blake. "Denbigh actually lost his life in trying to solve the opening stages. . . . Very well. A short time ago we ran to earth a wide organisation, whose headquarters were centred in London. I won't worry you with the details,

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but there was a branch from it which had been running in Brenport for some time, and there were certain suspicions which were actually attached to this house on the coast."

He hesitated, and then continued, talking rapidly :

"This evening the London headquarters were raided, actually only a few hours ago. I was there myself when the local ring-leader was arrested. He was known as Number Twenty-three. At midnight, or thereabouts, there is to be a round-up at the dépôt in Brenport, and possibly an extension of it to this house."

For a moment he paused, and Twysden took up the thread of the story.

"Blake and I, it was arranged, were to meet here at about eight, which we managed fairly successfully. We had decided to do a certain amount of spy work on the place on our own account and, if necessary, to extend the raid as far as here, as he has said. Stein, their Chief, we had gathered, was not due at Brenport before midnight, so we were trusting to have the place to ourselves more or less. But this was defeated by the sudden appearance of the man himself. For the sake of a suitable disguise Blake had travelled down in the rags of a tramp. This was necessary, as he is known down here."

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Smith whistled.

"Then you're the gentleman vagrant, are you?" he said. "But what was the idea of shifting?"

Blake smiled quickly.

"Obvious enough," was his answer. "Twysden was safe for the meantime with the pass I had taken from the genuine Number Twenty-three. My disguise as the tramp was obsolete, as I'll explain presently, but I felt that if I slipped into a long coat and wore a mask I might pass myself off as one of the London gang, whom I had seen a few hours ago. I happen to be about the same build as one of them, and I found that with a few trifling additions I could make myself sufficiently presentable. But it was actually the lucky stroke of recognising Cleaver which I put down as completing the deception."

Smith nodded slowly.

"All the same," he said, "I fail to see how you managed to get as far as that in the first place."

"Why?—oh, because of the fight in the cellar. Yes, it was a close call, but I was prepared for something, and it was just as well that I was. One of those devils must have spotted that I was disguised. Somebody fired off at me at random. Goodness knows where

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the bullet went, for I immediately clapped my hand up to my face. In the palm I had concealed a small wad of crimson paint. That's an old game.

"Then I fell, but the joke was on me, for I knocked myself out genuinely and grazed my temple. However, that may have saved my life, for I think they made off after this. Anyhow, I fancy they left me for dead. The next thing I remember was coming to and crawling up the steps to the sliding panel, which proceeded to open before my eyes—most convenient."

"Yes, what then?" demanded Twysden.

"Oh, I think I must have fainted again, although I seem to recollect a person bending over me and a voice saying: 'I think he's dead.'"

"That was me," interposed Smith, "and I think it must have been about then that another shot rang out."

"No, there I think you're wrong," said Blake. "That was only the cupboard door slamming."

"Gee! P'raps you're right," admitted the eager reporter. "The size of the room would naturally magnify the sound."

Twysden nodded.

"But now look here," said Blake. "We're wasting a thundering lot of time——"

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“ Oh, there’s no hurry,” interposed Twysden. “ The coxswain of the boat told me that Stein and Radley had gone down to Brenport to arrange about the cars. They’ll be a couple of hours at least, unless anything queer happens. Anyhow the patrol won’t be here for another hour, will they? What’s the time? Lord! it’s only half-past twelve. We can’t expect ’em for fifty minutes at the earliest.”

“ Oh, damn! ” grumbled Blake. “ Still, it was useless even thinking of having them here before. Stein might have guessed. He’s no fool, and it was useless surrounding the house unless that rat was inside.”

They now gathered in around the centre table.

Blake settled himself on one side, with Number Twenty-three—whom Smith now met under his proper title of Twysden—opposite. The reporter brought up a box and sat down between them.

There they remained for a few minutes, making plans, discarding one after the other.

Presently Blake said :

“ What about that poor devil, Carstairs? ”

“ He’s knocked out and quite safe until Stein returns,” remarked Twysden. “ But it’s Anne who’s worrying me.”

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"Why, by heaven, I was almost forgetting her! She'd disappeared from that pantry when I looked just now, but her orders were to clear out when things got busy. Perhaps she has gone already. When was she last seen?"

Smith was able to supply the information.

"Carstairs said that she was trapped down in the cellar."

"Good God!"

"Then in that case we'd better skip," snapped Twysden.

When, suddenly:

"Not so fast," said a silky voice from the door.

CHAPTER XXX

THEY swung round instantly.

Stein stood on the threshold, and the room looked literally full of men. How they had entered, so silently and mysteriously, the three around the table were at a loss to understand.

"You must pardon me if I interrupt," continued the Jew in a cold voice, "but it was most reprehensible of you to leave that window open. I could distinctly see your shadows on the wall as I drove up. But perhaps it was just as well, for naturally enough you have been making plans, and now I wish to have a say in them; I have about five minutes to spare."

He paused and consulted the gold watch that he wore on his thin wrist.

"First I will have you relieved of that dangerous-looking weapon which I see on the table. Don't move."

Blake's hand had made an involuntary motion towards the pistol. One of the men stepped forward and took charge of it.

"Now we're more comfortable," smirked Stein. "You may go," he added, turning to

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the others he had brought with him. "Neile, tell MacCartney to stand by in about ten minutes, and you can also inform him that we shall have four extra passengers for the outgoing trip."

Then he turned to the three men grouped around the table.

"It's all right, we needn't argue, for I think I know you all by now."

He glared angrily, almost fanatically, at one of the men across the room.

"Blake!" he cried, and there was a queer intensity in the tone of the accuser's voice.

"I've got you at last. I know I ought to have reckoned on your superior ability before now, but I failed to realise your capacity for trouble-making. It was you who discovered my Hampstead retreat, and wrecked it this evening. I suppose that was where you got the idea of the impersonation from—having arrested my right-hand man."

The Jew still glared across at the detective, and his expression was terrible.

"You've deceived me long enough, and so far I have held my hand, but this is the end. You tricked me with your disguise, and over the pass you handed on to the other. Who is it? Ah, Twysden.

"I was suspicious of him, but only certain

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when I received the report from local headquarters. They told me of the latest development in London, and then I knew. I fancied that I recognised him from a photograph—remember that Scotland Yard is not the only institution with an information bureau.

“As for you, you despicable hound,” he added, wheeling round on Smith, “you’re from the *Daily Gazette*, aren’t you? You’ve had the audacity to draw attention to my schemes on more than one occasion——”

“Holy gee,” gasped the unperturbed reporter, “then you are——”

“Yes—the chief of the biggest drug-running syndicate that the world’s ever known. I planned it, and I worked on it from the start. This damned hotel’s nothing but a blind. But, as even the Press must have realised, the smuggling was the most difficult part—you understood that much, but you went no further. Of course, I could always get the stuff up to the coast, but even then I mystified the world with my success.

“That was why I had the *Nautilus* built, at a foreign port in the Mediterranean. Your damned paper never dreamed of that possibility, did it?” hissed Stein, leering at the unfortunate reporter. “But that’s not all. I tracked you down, Blake, as you had

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tracked me, some days ago—and the confirmation of my suspicions about you, Twysden, only came to-night. It took time to connect you with the C.I.D., but you were actually after my last secret—and now you've got it. As for you, Smith, you represented a large paper, and you knew too much. It was I who tipped you off about the proposed coup to-night. I designed to get you all under the same roof and crush you, and I've succeeded.

“To-night you come out in the *Nautilus* with me, and it's going to be your last voyage; do you understand, you swine? You'd plot to finish me, would you? By God, we'll wait and see who holds the last card.”

He laughed hideously, and into the atmosphere of the room seemed to come a queer sense of unreality.

Presently Stein spoke again.

“I've sworn I will crush you—my only regret is that I have failed to do so before. For you have already done me infinite harm. My headquarters you have discovered, even as you have found this house and the secret submarine. You have forced my hand now, and I shall have to move my stations. But no matter, I still have the boat.

“You three, and the man in the cellar below, Carstairs, alone know the fullest

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details, and I cannot afford to share them with anybody. You will simply vanish, and you can thank God that there are worse deaths than being drowned with a half-hundredweight sinker lashed to your ankles. It might interest you to know that Denbigh was shot from one of these windows, and he took several minutes to die, so I was told."

Again the man's lips snarled back into a cruel smile, though presently his face re-assumed its expression of snake-like frigidity.

A strange glitter of madness had crept into the narrow eyes.

"By God," he repeated, "I'll——"

Suddenly came the sound of running steps on the stairs outside, and an agitated figure loomed up at the doorway.

It was Cleaver. He was breathless, and white in the face. Radley followed him into the room.

"Chief," yelled Cleaver, "the boat's gone! She's been dived, and 'll be out to sea by this time. I saw her submerge with my own eyes. Gawd knows who's taken her! Mac-Cartney's ashore, and nearly out of his wits."

Radley stepped up to the terrified man, and shook him until his teeth rattled.

"Is this true?" he roared.

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"Gawd 'elp me, yes," gasped the cringing man.

A crash on the woodwork of one of the doors in the house beneath them rang out as he spoke.

Radley turned helplessly to the Jew, and blank terror showed in the flashing eyes.

But Stein had drawn an automatic from his hip pocket. Slowly he swung round on Blake and his two companions.

"I suppose you think you've won," he hissed, "but, if I fall, we all go together."

He hesitated for a moment, then——

Deliberately he aimed, full at the nearest of the men across the room, and pressed the trigger.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE report of the shot had barely thundered out before there came the sudden crack of a rifle from outside on the cliff.

A bullet whistled in through the open casement, extinguishing the light, and brought the pieces of the shade and globe crashing in fragments to the ground.

The room was instantly thrown into pitch darkness, and under the mantle of dim obscurity moved the uncertain figures of men, but only for a second, for a blinding white ray, directed on the house from seaward, illuminated the scene, and lit up the room like sunlight.

Then a shout echoed along the corridor outside, and a figure appeared at the window and dropped through.

Stein's shot had gone wide, and now, completely taken by surprise, and half blinded by the brilliant light, the Jew failed to fire again.

Three naval ratings lined the wall, and when Twysden turned to the doorway he saw Carstairs standing there, with a revolver in

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his right hand and his free arm about Anne.

"Drop everything, Stein," he ordered.

The Jew's weapon thudded to the floor.

"Search 'em."

One of the sailors sprang forward and ran his hands over Radley and Stein, producing a gun from the side-pocket of the latter.

"You gentlemen ought to be under a special emergency act," he muttered, as he gathered up the second pistol.

Carstairs turned to the man in the uniform of a leading seaman.

"March off the prisoners, coxswain, and then stand by to lend a hand below. You can put the two gentlemen in the room under here. Call up immediately if you want anything."

"Aye, aye, sir."

And, without a backward glance, they filed out.

The door had scarcely closed behind them before Blake stepped across the room and grasped the officer firmly by the hand.

"How on earth did you manage it?" he demanded.

Carstairs laughed.

"Oh, easy enough," he said, "although I

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will admit that we were blessed with the most exceptional good luck. We, Anne and I, actually escaped in the submarine, as perhaps you've guessed by now. We dived, and got out to sea, and then I knocked out the coxswain. It may sound rather a dirty trick, but, as far as I could see, it was our only chance."

"I should say so," interrupted Smith. "How did you manage, then?"

"Well, I do happen to know something about handling these boats, and, to begin with, I succeeded in passing myself off as Stein. After a while it struck me that, with my former experience, I might be able to carry on on my own, and that is what we risked."

"And Anne?" interposed Blake.

"I managed to pass her off as a sort of hostage. But where was I? Oh, yes.

"Presently we broke surface, and steered up towards the north. My main idea had been to try and make Brenport, and get assistance from the coastguard station, for I gathered that trouble was brewing up at the house.

"We cruised on for a bit, running awash, when suddenly, out of the mist, loomed the bows and side-lights of a ship. She was a destroyer actually, and just missed running us down by a hair's breadth. It was a pretty

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exciting moment, I can tell you. However, they spotted us in time, and then came up alongside. Briggs was her skipper, an old pal of mine, and the ship was the *Termagant*, on passage for Chatham."

He paused for a moment, and Twysden asked a question.

"How was it the submarine's crew didn't smell a rat?" he asked.

Carstairs smiled.

"They didn't get much of a chance," he said. "They were battened down in the engine-room, and we took good care to see that the communicating door between them and the conning-tower was kept tight closed; incidentally, when I rang through to stop the engines they fondly imagined that we had reached the *Tcheka Russe*."

He laughed.

"I seem to be making quite a speech. Well, we had hardly lost way before the *Termagant* lowered a boat and boarded us. I told them how things stood, and managed to get an armed crew to pull us ashore. They left a party on board the submarine to take charge, and then the destroyer steamed over to investigate the yacht.

"Before we shoved off, I arranged with the skipper to have the searchlight ready and

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trained on the house, and the sound of the first rifle-shot was to be the signal for opening up."

"And darned handy that proved to be," interrupted Blake.

"As I say," Carstairs continued, "I managed to get pulled ashore, with Anne—who acted like a little heroine the whole time, incidentally. We landed under the cliff, and made our best way up, and I reckon we must have done the ascent in record time. Two men tackled the front of the house. Anne and I, with another, forced the French windows, while the remainder, seeing the light in this room, swarmed up to the roof. The men loved it. I heard one of them whisper that it was as good as a 'blinkin' play.'"

"Did you see Stein's car in the drive?" asked Twysden, during the short pause which had followed Carstairs' last words.

"Yes," came the ready answer; "that was what warned me that things might be getting rather desperate inside. Immediately I spotted that, I guessed it was time to take immediate action, and one of my heroes 'picked off' this light from the cliff-side."

Again he hesitated. The others were listening intently, and presently he continued:

"That seems to be about the lot, and all I

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can say is that I hope the *Termagant* has boarded the *Tcheka Russe*. The whole thing's a pretty dirty job, as far as I can see. Drugs, isn't it? "

Blake nodded. " How did you guess? " he asked suddenly—so suddenly that Carstairs laughed.

" I don't seem to be quite such a lamb as you take me for," he smiled.

Suddenly Twysden blurted out :

" Look here, Carstairs, there's an apology and an explanation I owe you. In the first place, I have to confess that I really tried to give you the slip on the Cliffs this evening."

" I know ; I realised that ; that was the very reason I kept on hollering," was the laughing return.

" Though, later on," continued the young detective, " I thought you might be useful. Even then I was afraid to let you into things fully, as I was frightened that you might not have felt confident enough to play up to the part. Later, of course, once I had let myself in for the part of Number Twenty-three, it was essential to keep up appearances, although I did try to come over and help you when you were in the cavern, unconscious. Goodness only knows what we should have

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done without you, as it transpired. The raid on this house was quite indefinite, though it would probably not have occurred before two—it's only about one now. We should all have been scuppered, and perhaps the raiding-party as well."

"Thanks," said Carstairs, "but for the Lord's sake don't spread it on so blessed thick, or you'll make me feel quite conceited. But, if there's one thing I should like cleared up, it's the question of where you got to last night."

Twysden smiled.

"That's simple enough," he answered. "I actually went up to London by the first train to make my report to Scotland Yard. It was essential that I should make the trip in secret, and that was my reason for not leaving by the front gate in the usual manner. Incidentally, I was to meet Blake in the early hours, and it was then that we made our final plans about to-night. You've seen for yourself how successful they actually proved."

He smiled bitterly.

"All the same, I have a piece of news which might interest you, and that is the identity of the masked man who attacked you on the Cliffs. Blake can tell you. It was actually the devil they know as 'Mac' down here."

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“ The man with the scarred face ? ”

Blake nodded.

“ Yes, the very same. As you may have guessed already, he was under the impression that you were Twysden. It was the impression he must have received when he saw you in the inn yard on the first night, when you were looking at the other car.”

Twysden agreed.

“ I think Blake is right,” he said. “ They must have been on the *qui vive* for me from the very beginning, and had been warned to look out for my machine.”

He paused, and, as they listened, a gust of wind cut along the cliff-side and came howling round the room in the tower.

Anne shivered involuntarily, and, almost by instinct, turned to Carstairs, who still stood by her side.

He glanced down into her troubled eyes.

“ What’s the matter ? ” he whispered.

She shook her head without answering.

Carstairs nodded sympathetically.

“ I understand,” he said. “ I shall be glad to be clear of this myself.” Presently he strolled over to the piece of apparatus at the window-side.

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"Do you know what this is?" he demanded, turning to the room.

"Looks like a signalling gadget," suggested somebody.

Carstairs grinned.

"Right first time," he said.

He tested the circuits, and then sat down and tapped a message.

They saw the thin ray gleam out and an answering light flash from seaward.

Anne stepped across, and knelt by his side.

"I'm just asking the *Termagant* how things are moving," he volunteered. Then he turned to Blake. "What are our future plans?" he demanded.

The other looked doubtful.

"I don't think we can do better than wait for the patrol," he said. "Their orders are to come straight on here, if they receive no definite orders from Twysden. They should be along in another half-hour in that case. What do you say?"

Carstairs agreed with him.

"I don't see that there's anything else for it," he admitted, as he returned to his signalling.

There followed a long silence, which was only broken in upon occasionally by the

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sighing of the wind and the booming of the distant surf.

Blake had opened his mouth, as if to speak again, when suddenly the stillness of the room was shattered by a loud cry, which echoed in a distant part of the house.

CHAPTER XXXII

I

THEY all turned towards the door. Anne gripped Carstairs by the arm, and looked up into his eyes fearfully.

"What was that?" she asked in a horrified whisper.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know for certain—yet," he admitted.

Then he rose and crossed the room, and, as he did so, they heard the hollow cry again.

He swung round on Blake.

"That sounded rather like the coxswain's voice," he said. "I told him to let me know immediately if there was any trouble. Do you mind waiting with Anne? And Twysden, will you come with me? You're armed, and, as there may be some new danger, another gun will be useful."

He dashed out, and Twysden quickly followed.

As they ran down the narrow stairs the shout was repeated a third time. They

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came to a slender corridor, and from there to a lobby. To one side stood an open door.

They entered together.

Facing them was a bare wall—one of the four in an unfurnished room. The floor was of stone, and, writhing on it, they immediately saw a figure dressed in the uniform of a leading seaman. Bending over him, aghast and helpless, was another.

For a moment the tortured man on the ground rolled over and faced them.

Carstairs came to a sudden halt, and stood motionless, while Twysden stepped back a pace with a choking, strangled cry.

The atmosphere of the room was tainted with a terrible chemical odour, and with it came the smell of burning flesh.

Presently Carstairs mastered himself with an effort, and moved across the room. Then he dragged up the kneeling figure to face him.

"How the devil did this happen? And where are the prisoners?" he demanded in a single breath.

The man straightened up, and Twysden stepped past him to examine the prostrate figure, who now lay strangely still.

"They're all in the hall," was the seaman's

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breathless answer, "excepting for the Jew. We separated him from the others, and locked him in here."

"Yes. What then?" Carstairs demanded irritably. "Where is this man—the Jew—now?"

And, to his surprise, the sailor pointed vaguely to the far wall.

"Through there," was his amazing answer; "he's disappeared."

At that moment there came a hurried exclamation from Twysden.

"He's gone, poor devil!" he said. "He's got a bullet in his lungs, and his head——" He choked back a cry of horror. "Someone must have thrown vitriol. His face is ghastly. A mere rag."

He shuddered.

"Poor devil!" he repeated.

For a moment no one spoke. They all appeared stunned by this new surprise and its appalling sequel.

But suddenly Carstairs turned.

"Look here, Twysden," he said, "we've got to do something pretty smartly, or goodness knows what'll happen. Run down to the hall and see that everything's quiet there. In the meantime, I'll see what I can find out about this devil Stein."

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Twysden nodded readily enough.

"All right," he said, and made a move downstairs.

Then Carstairs turned to the sailor.

"Now let's have the whole story—smartly, now."

The man hesitated for a moment, and looked about him uneasily. But presently he spoke.

"It was like this 'ere," he began, speaking hurriedly, and in a low voice. "We rounded up the men in the house and put 'em under a guard, down below in the hall. But 'Odgson, the coxswain—'im," he added, and, by way of further explanation, pointed with a quivering hand at the still form at their feet, "decided to separate off the Chief, that Jew chap, and so we locked 'im in this 'ere room—alone."

He paused.

"The room was quite empty, and looked safe enough. There aren't no windows, as perhaps you've observed, sir."

Carstairs nodded impatiently.

"Quick, man; what happened then?"

"Aye, aye, sir, I'm coming along as rapid as possible. We locked the chap up in 'ere, as I said, and thought him safe enough. I was told off as sentry at the door.

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" Well, everything was quiet and orderly for some minutes, and I thought the prisoner had settled down calm, when suddenly I heard a queer noise."

" What sort of noise ? " snapped Carstairs.

The man considered.

" Something like thunder it were," he decided eventually.

" Are you sure that it wasn't the sound of the storm out at sea ? "

But the man was positive on this point.

" Certain, sir. It was a sort of metallic booming, and it came from this room. I'll tell you why I didn't think it was the more natural noise in a minute."

" Very well, go on."

" I tried the door immediately, to have a look inside. But it was locked, for 'Odgson, unthinkin', had taken the key with him. So I ran to the end of the passage, and gave the alarm below. After a second or two the coxswain came running up, and when I had made my report he unlocked the door, and in we went. Him first."

Again the man hesitated in his speech, and Carstairs could see that he had been badly shaken.

" 'Odgson was leading, as I said, and he'd hardly entered before there came the sound of a

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muffled shot. I glanced over his shoulder, and there was Stein with a queer-looking pistol smoking in one hand, and a thin, dark-blue coloured bottle raised in the other. The coxswain gave a terrible cough, but staggered forward, and it was just about then that the Jew flung the flask of liquid full in 'Odgson's face. He yelled then, and fell back into my arms, with that fluid pouring down over his eyes. Then I shouted for help, and bent over him—but not before I'd spotted something mighty uncommon happening in this room."

And, as Twysden ran along the passageway and thundered up the stairs outside, the sailor began his final startling statement.

"It was that wall," he cried. "It's made of sheet steel. I hammered on it just now and it rang hollow."

Carstairs glanced round at the other who had just entered.

"I've just been listening to a most astounding story. Is everything all right below?"

Twysden inclined his head quickly.

"Yes, except that Stein is missing. I've organised a patrol for the gardens. I think he's safe enough."

"I hope so," cried Carstairs fiercely. "If it's my last action, I'm going to ensure that he

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goes to the gallows, if for this night's work alone."

Then he turned to the sailor questioningly.

"There isn't much left to tell," the man continued, "excepting the way the Jew escaped.

"When we entered the room at first, it seemed to me that the far wall was moving, and after a while I saw that that was what was actually happening. As we ran forward it came sliding down bodily, like a great iron shutter, and the Jew was behind it when it had closed fully."

Twysden sprang over and tested it, then he looked across at Carstairs.

"He's right," he said, "there must be some hidden motor, and a concealed spring of some sort, which we haven't found, that works it."

Carstairs agreed with him.

"And that thunderous noise which the man heard must have been the wall sliding down. Damn it!" he muttered "that fiend has done us in again."

But Twysden failed to answer him. He was examining the metal surface of the wall with eager, questing fingers.

"Here, Carstairs," he called, after a few moments' ardent search. "I rather think that there's a small doorway here. There

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seems to be a hinge, but I can't get the thing open."

The other ran to his side, and peered eagerly over his shoulder.

"By jingo," he said, "you're right. Here, let me have a go."

High up, and set to one side, there seemed to be some form of observation window, now tightly closed, probably constructed to allow anyone behind the steel screen to spy into the room which they now occupied.

Carstairs prised at a thin crack which appeared beside the hinge.

He leant over to Twysden, who was watching him nervously.

"It seems to be giving a little," he whispered. Then he continued his attack with a thin-bladed knife.

For a while nothing seemed to happen, but suddenly a narrow slit of an opening began to show, and at the end of another minute's anxious labour, it hinged back.

It was, as they had imagined, a small observation shutter, about a foot long and six inches deep. They both craned upwards, and gazed into the mysterious room beyond.

Seasoned to unusual spectacles as the two men were, the sight which met their eyes came as an undeniable shock.

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After the first glance Carstairs ordered the seaman to join the patrol in the gardens, and then again turned his attention to the small shuttered opening.

He found that he was now looking into a deep apartment, designed as a laboratory rather than a living space. Shallow benches lined the walls, and on them and the innumerable wall brackets, stood glass containers and a number of electrical cells. A small motor purred in one corner, and the opposite one was screened off by a tall switchboard, bearing a multitude of galvanometers and brass dials, with nervous twitching pointers.

At a distant table, working composedly and undisturbed, sat Stein. An intricacy of electric leads was spread out before him, and under the glare of a suspended arc lamp by his side, loomed the shadow of an enormous double-pole switch.

His task, it seemed, was almost completed ; even as they looked he rose, and moved over into the obscurity of a dim corner.

Carstairs watched him complacently, for he could easily see that the far room, walled in steel, was without door or window, and this fact alone made him realise that the fiend in his electrical laboratory was cornered as surely as any rat in its trap.

Stein had reappeared now, and stood

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irresolute, with his hand on the lever of the switch beside him. For the moment he looked vaguely alarmed and apprehensive, but at that instant the two watchers became aware of a quick step behind them.

They turned instinctively.

Anne stood at their elbows, but it was a transformed person whom they saw, a figure transformed by the forces of loathing and hate.

For a second she, too, peered into the distant room, and as suddenly recognised the hunched figure of the Jew.

Instantly, and before they could intervene, she had raised a pistol, which she held in an unshaking hand—and fired ; and they realised, as the report echoed out, and Stein tottered and fell, that she had shot him dead.

But this was not all, for the stricken man had pressed down and made connection on the double-pole switch as he swung forward.

They waited, and, as they stood, motionless, there came the dull rumble of an explosion underfoot.

2

Carstairs snatched at Anne's wrist, and made for the door.

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"Come on!" he shouted. "It's no good waiting here. That explosion sounded as if it came from the cavern under the house. We'd better get down and investigate."

He half dragged, half carried the fainting girl from the scene of the tragedy, and stumbled down the stairs into the broad hall-way. As they descended, the lights began to grow dull, and presently dimmed out altogether, which led to further confusion.

A cry rang out from the darkness before them, and then somebody appeared carrying a lantern.

"Blake!" yelled Twysden.

"Hullo!" came the muffled answer from the dining-room. "I'm in here, but we shall have to clear out pretty smartly. God help the poor devils who're trapped in the cavern, for I think the house is on fire. One of your men has just reported flames shooting up through the panel in here."

He paused.

"By heaven, yes! They're right, too. And there are one or two of Stein's gang who barricaded themselves down below. They'll be finished by now, and *we* shall have to get out pretty quick too. There's a chance of the cliff collapsing."

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He emerged into the flickering lamplight as he spoke.

"Ah, here you are, Anne. You look pretty done, poor child. Thank the Lord you're safe, anyhow. I thought I heard a pistol-shot just now. Where's Smith? We shall have to make a move for the gardens."

At his order the front door was thrown open, and they hustled out.

"I took the liberty of sending one of the hands you brought from the destroyer to fetch the patrol," Blake continued as they crowded through. "He could drive, and he took Stein's car. He ought to be back soon."

He turned as he spoke.

"Ah, here they come," he added, as a flash of headlights shone on the weed-grown lane.

Two large cars presently ran up, and came to a stop beside them. A number of dark uniformed figures descended, who immediately crowded around Blake.

For some time they stood, giving and receiving reports, while the prisoners were mustered and ordered into the tonneaux of the waiting motors.

In the interval which followed, Carstairs turned to Twysden, and tapped the gun that the latter still held in his hand.

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“ Was that the pistol you were cleaning last night ? ” he queried with a grim smile.

. Twysden nodded.

“ Yes, I unpacked and oiled it over. I thought that I might be needing it soon, so I loaded it up as well. But I haven’t used it, actually, since I was at the practice butts last. I packed it in a hurry.”

Carstairs grinned. “ That was why you forgot to extract the spent cartridge-case, I suppose ? ”

The other looked at him sharply.

“ Yes, I’d left it in by some oversight, but how the devil did you know ? ”

But the answer was interrupted by Blake, who turned to Carstairs.

“ The *Termagant* has just got a signal through to the coastguard station to say that they have boarded the yacht, and, as they’ve found enough drugs on board to stock a chemist’s shop, they’ve decided to tow her into harbour to-morrow. They also thought of warning the raiding-party of our danger here, and they were actually on the way when they met my messenger. But——”

Suddenly from behind them there came the roar of the burning building and the thunder of falling masonry. The house was a mass of flames from cellar to attic, and

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great tongues of fire blazed from the upper windows.

"What's become of Stein?" demanded Blake, who had been checking the numbers as they stood there.

Carstairs flashed a look at Twysden, who returned it with one of complete understanding, and then glanced down into Anne's pale, upturned face, eventually answering for her.

"He's dead," he replied in a low voice. "He shot himself in the steel room."

Then he turned to the others.

"Shall we make a move?" he said.

And so they left the house on the headland, and crept back to the village along the winding coast road. But when they turned and took their last look at the doomed building from the hills, they saw it, a mask of flames, and a veritable beacon blazing over the sea to the eastward.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It had just struck the hour of twelve, two days after the events narrated in the previous chapter. The thunder of the traffic, rumbling down Fleet Street, came faintly to a small group of people who were assembled in a certain office belonging to the *Daily Gazette*.

The hands of the desk-side clock in Mr. Smith's office had turned to a few minutes past noon, when the door opened to admit a late member, who now made the company complete.

"Take a chair, Mr. Twysden; I think we are all here now."

Mr. Smith looked quickly round on the waiting faces about him. First on Anne, who sat huddled up close to the stolid figure of Carstairs on his right hand, and then on Blake, who leant eagerly forward from just opposite.

"As you are all aware," he began, "I requested you to assemble here so that we might read over the last papers of the late Mr. Denbigh."

He paused and looked up gravely.

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“Or rather, I should say, that had been my intention up to a few hours ago. But since then it has come to my knowledge that amongst us there is a relation—a close relation—to whom this document should now undoubtedly be handed.”

He looked across at Anne with troubled eyes, but she forestalled his apologies.

She shook her head sadly.

“Mr. Blake has already told me that the papers were in your keeping. He informed me that that was what you had said two days ago. But it is my wish that you should continue, and read them to these gentlemen,” she murmured. “They have all done so much towards tracking down my father’s murderers, and it would be only fair to place any information in their hands without reserve. I shall be grateful to you if you will proceed with your previous intention.”

Mr. Smith bowed, and then picked up a sealed document which he had meant to hand across unbroken.

He now cut the tapes, and, having spread the closely written pages out before him, began the strange story of the “House of Darkness.”

The narrative was without heading, being merely dated :

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“ ‘ *September, 1925.*

“ ‘ It is my purpose, in writing these few pages, to put into the hands of some able follower (preferably Blake, who is already in possession of some facts of the case) the full truth, such as I know it, of the strange case which it has been my fortune partly to unravel.

“ ‘ At the time at which I write, I feel assured that the disclosure of this mystery is a one-man affair, and I trust that my theory will be proved correct, in which event these words need never be read. But if, in some unforeseen way, I am diverted from my set purpose, by misfortune or by death, here at least is a statement which will explain my endeavours, and the chance which put the information before me in the first instance.

“ ‘ I have placed this paper into the hands of a trusted and honourable gentleman, and it is to him, or to those who follow me, that I entrust the life of my only child, the sole being on this earth whom I truly love.

“ ‘ All the facts of this case I have kept religiously from her, and it is my fondest hope that she should be kept in ignorance of them until the end, when the whole truth is known.’ ”

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Mr. Smith looked up slowly.

“ That is your father’s preliminary note. The narrative commences on the next page. Do you still wish me to read on ? ”

The young girl inclined her head, and, in response to the unspoken answer, the man at the desk continued :

“ ‘ PART ONE

“ ‘ The events of which I write open in the late autumn months of last year (1924), and were brought before me in a particularly unprecedented way during a Scandinavian holiday cruise.

“ ‘ At the time of Leveson’s offer of which I shall speak, I was alone in London ; Anne was staying with relations in Scotland, and I was free from the calls of the “ Yard ” for the better part of a month.

“ ‘ I met Leveson at lunch at my club quite unexpectedly, for I imagined him to be in the Baltic, and, when he suggested a holiday in Norway in his yacht, I must confess to jumping at the idea, and accepted immediately.

“ ‘ I am outlining the opening chapters in this way merely to show how the hand of fate was actually directing my footsteps, and reveal how it eventually put me straight on to the

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trail of an exceptional case, one which, I am assured, is unparalleled in the annals of crime.

“ ‘ But to continue.

“ ‘ We sailed from Gravesend in Leveson’s yacht—quite a small thing ; three hundred tons at the most, I think he said—and during the first few days made a rapid passage across the North Sea. But I propose to skip the events of the first week or so, and move on to the amazing sequel which was awaiting me at Krenstaad. It was our easternmost port of call, and we had decided to return home from there, having broken our cruise by remaining for a few days at this beautiful fiord-township.

“ ‘ It was a unique experience for me, and I must confess to enjoying every minute of the stay.

“ ‘ Krenstaad lies huddled at the foot of a great range of towering cliffs, and I was not altogether surprised to hear that the place is left alone and quite unvisited. It was even an event, I gathered, for a ship to steam up the narrow passage and anchor off its rocky shore.

“ ‘ Perhaps this latter fact, then, will best explain our astonishment at the happenings of that particular evening.

“ ‘ A creeping sea-fog had drifted down over us during the afternoon, and towards dusk we were shrouded in its dark folds, which

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obscured the land and the lights of the town almost completely.

“ ‘ The mist brought with it no concern for our future safety, as the wind had dropped to a mere whisper. We were moored securely enough, and the weather conditions merely portended that we should not be able to move until they lifted or changed in some way.

“ ‘ Towards eight or nine o’clock, or thereabouts, Leveson called me from the cabin up on deck, and, when I stood beside him, asked me if I could hear any sound coming from over the water.

“ ‘ I listened, and at first answered “ No,” but by and by I became aware of a muffled noise, which I felt could be nothing more nor less than the beat of engines, and the swish of the wake from some ship.

“ ‘ I told him what I thought, and he nodded slowly, and was strangely silent when we eventually descended to supper and to bed.

“ ‘ Half way through the evening meal, however, I suddenly saw a dark hull swing past one of the cabin scuttles, and presently, from close by, followed the rattle of cable and the sudden clang of a ship’s bell.

“ ‘ We did not turn in so early as we had previously decided, for later on I made for the upper deck again, and began to pace up

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and down restlessly. I was in the grip of some emotion which I could not account for, and, as sleep seemed to be out of the question, I next set about peering through the darkness for the other ship in this usually deserted anchorage.

“ ‘ And presently I saw her.

“ ‘ It was quite dark, but she was carrying a blaze of lights, and under the gleam of them I could detect a nervous movement on her decks, and the occasional beat and ring of hammers, which told me that some form of repairs was being carried out on board. There was the blur of hurrying figures and, as I studied them, gradually I made out the lines of her.

“ ‘ She was a big, private yacht, a one-funneller, and painted black. This I imagined, for she blended into the shades of the night so as to be practically indistinguishable.

“ ‘ But I could make out little more, except that she was lying more towards the middle of the channel than we were, and hence farther from the town.

“ ‘ Presently I thought I saw a boat being manned and lowered, but my attention was suddenly withdrawn by Leveson, who had now joined me, and then we sank into a general conversation, of which I cannot recollect a word, excepting that it had

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some connection with salmon-fishing to begin with.

“ ‘ Leveson seemed to have lost all further interest in the other ship in the fiord, but, as his curiosity waned, so mine had intensified, until, when he eventually suggested retiring to our bunks, I told him that I had decided to remain on deck for some minutes longer ; and so, muttering a yawned “ Good-night,” he left me.

“ ‘ How long I remained up there, watchful and alone, I was never able to determine exactly, but I can distinctly recall that I was about to go below myself when there came to my attentive ears the muffled sounds of dipping oars.

“ ‘ I glanced quickly shorewards, and presently the beat came to me more clearly.

“ ‘ By and by I saw a boat pulling swiftly over the water, a long, lean galley, with a flare blazing in the stern sheets, and the boat’s bows were heading straight for our gangway.

“ ‘ I hastily drew into the shadow of the after deck-house and watched the approach. For a moment, I will admit that a vague suspicion of a proposed attack flashed through my mind, but when I recognised, as I very soon did, that most of the boat’s crew were under the influence of drink, I put this supposition out of my mind.

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“ ‘ Presently the boat actually ran up alongside, but hardly had the gunwale touched the yacht’s ladder when the coxswain, realising his error, sheered off again, and shot away into the night. Obviously enough, the boat was returning from the shore, and had mistaken the hull of Leveson’s ship, in the misty darkness, for their own ; and now, realising their blunder, they had pulled away.

“ ‘ But, although the whole affair had been silent, and quickly over, the happening, commonplace as it might seem, left me with quickened breath and a wildly beating heart. For in one of the boat’s crew I had immediately recognised a much-feared and badly-wanted character, a Swede called Svenson, and another, also under the flare of the torchlight, to be a man with a scarred face—a notorious criminal, more popularly known as “ Mac.”

“ ‘ I knew that they could not possibly have seen me in the position in which I had been concealed, but the incident came as a decided shock, nevertheless. I remained on deck for some time longer, ruminating on my future course of action.

“ ‘ Without any shadow of doubt, I realised that the men must undoubtedly form part of the complement of the black ship I had seen. But at length—unwisely, perhaps, in

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the light of the following events—I postponed my activities until daylight, and went below, where I immediately fell into a deep sleep.

“ ‘ It was fully nine o’clock before I awoke, and when I ascended to the deck the sun was shining brightly. It was a glorious day, and the surface of the land-locked sea sparkled on its myriad wavelet crests. The mist had lifted, but I looked in vain for the black ship—she was gone.

“ ‘ As I think I have already mentioned, we had been meaning to leave Krenstaad early that day; all the same, I think that I must have startled Leveson at first by my demand that we should put to sea immediately; but when I explained my reason, he was all eagerness to fall in with my plans.

“ ‘ Two hours later we were actually under way, and already launched on to the scheme of following the strange yacht, with its queer crew, which we were positive could not be more than a few hours ahead of us at the very most.

“ ‘ Before we had shortened in and weighed the anchor, Leveson and I had raced ashore in the launch on the search for information, but all that the innocent townspeople could tell us was that they had never seen the black ship before, but they thought that the vessel had been forced to put in there owing

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to some minor engine defect. Moreover, they stubbornly denied ever having previously encountered any of the crew, and we gathered, from a few pointed remarks, that they were neither eager nor over-anxious to renew their acquaintance.

“ ‘ With this flimsy knowledge, then, we started out in pursuit.

“ ‘ I do not intend to trouble you here with a weary statement of the subsequent cruise, with its trials and disappointments. I need only say that, in point of fact, we traced the yacht to England, and there lost all track of her.

“ ‘ Actually we made the centre of our observations too far to the north, on the strength of a report that the other yacht had not passed Dover.

“ ‘ And so, for the time being at least, my enquiry came to a close.

“ ‘ PART TWO

“ ‘ I have thought fit to sub-divide the story of the case into two separate portions. The opening pages merely outline the affair as it was presented to me in its opening phases, and it will now be my endeavour to show you how this primary discovery set me on to the true heart of the mystery.

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“ ‘ By January of the following year I was deeply engrossed in a special investigation at Scotland Yard, but a letter which I received from Leveson, just after the New Year, re-awoke my previous interest in the black ship and the two members of her crew who had concerned me so much. Just by the merest chance, he told me, he had stumbled over a trace of the strange yacht once more, this time at a small seaport on the east coast, in Suffolk.

“ ‘ I had been much engrossed in a deep mystery at the time connected with the drug traffic, and it came as almost a relief to be able to dilute my worries with this former attraction. The long and the short of it was that I immediately travelled down to Brenport, in reality little more than a mere fishing village, and by some sheer accident again plunged into a deeply-concealed intrigue, which, strangely enough, coupled the strange ship with the very case I then had on hand.

“ ‘ Leveson, who by now had come to take an enormous interest in the mystery, carried on a series of investigations from a farmhouse on the cliffs, close by the village, and was soon able to verify the fact that a yacht—the very one which had anchored so close to us that last night in the Norwegian fiord—was actually known to pay periodic visits to this deserted portion of the east coast.

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“ ‘ Together we watched her steam up and drop anchor off a small bay, known locally as Fisherman’s Cove. She arrived one evening and was gone next morning, but we were certain that no boat had either visited or left her.

“ ‘ Which of us was the first to suggest it I have forgotten ; but somehow the possibility of submarine connection was considered, and, after we had watched a second coming and going, we felt assured that this supposition had been a correct one.

“ ‘ The theory was further borne out by the fact that the man “ Mac ” had been seen and recognised in London, and, as he was known not to have landed at any seaport, nor elsewhere from any steamer, our conviction soon grew into a certainty.

“ ‘ We delayed any action for a few days, but finally I was left to carry on my project single-handed, as my friend, Leveson, fell a victim to the influenza epidemic, and passed away during the early spring.

“ ‘ In the summer, with my case still incomplete, I eventually decided to confine my energies to Brenport, and there I resolved to go and lodge at the Red Lion Inn.

“ ‘ After a week I changed over to the Royal, on the opposite side of the road, and, before many days had passed, I learned that

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Neile, a discharged murderer in a well-known "non-proven" case, was in the habit of visiting the cellars of this very house—the hotel in which, at the moment, I occupied a top bedroom.

" " This was a surprise enough in all conscience, but when I came to learn, as I subsequently did, that I was actually living in a receiving-station of the drug traffic, my amazement knew no bounds.

" " It seems almost incredible to me now, looking back on the state of affairs as they existed, to think that the business was allowed to continue under the very noses of the village folk ; but actually, the men had chosen their ground cleverly and well, for there was a complete lack of local interest.

" " I do not insinuate that the work was carried out openly. Perhaps it was because I was on the special look-out for evidence that it struck me as strangely significant that the inn's cellars were always closed during the daylight hours.

" " I need not detail the artifices which enabled me to listen to the conversations in the vaults deep down under the hotel ; suffice to say that very soon I had substantiated my suspicions in this particular, and now had to look farther afield.

" " My knowledge then was roughly this :

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“ ‘ First, these men were intimately connected with the trafficking of drugs.

“ ‘ Second, they were in the habit of running a ship from the east coast of England to Norway, and perhaps even beyond—a vessel which in some unknown and concealed manner disembarked criminals with the cargo of drugs.

“ ‘ And third, amongst their number were two men at least who were badly “ wanted ” on several charges.

“ ‘ The train of my deductions now forced me to take an irrevocable step.

“ ‘ By special leave I “ disappeared,” although I experienced considerable difficulty in subsequently hushing the matter up ; and in four months, after an exhaustive search in London and again in Norway—this time even farther, in Russia—I found that I held the answer to the entire mystery in my hands.

“ ‘ My decision to disappear may have been a rash one, but, all the same, in the light of the main issue, I felt that the results were worthy of the step and of the attendant risk. I had resolved to carry on single-handed, and I feel that I have succeeded.

“ ‘ I write these final notes on the boat, homeward bound from Oslo. I intend to entrust them to a friend whom I have encountered on the passage, and he will open them

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only when he hears of my possible death, the information being then immediately imparted to Blake. But, as I presume that no one will have borne with me so far unless this contingency has arisen, I hasten to commit my final discoveries to paper.

“ ‘ You must hear, in the first place, that there is a secret drug route from China, through North Russia, to England. The yacht, whose name I understand to be the *Tcheka Russe*, sails to the Suffolk coast from the White Sea, with a full cargo, probably innocent enough in bulk, but with an enormous store of various drugs beside.

“ ‘ From her, on arrival, the precious freight is landed by submarine (where, I am as yet uncertain, but I imagine somewhere on the coast by the Summer Hotel above Fisherman’s Cove). There is a collecting-house under the cellars of the Royal Inn at Brentport, and the headquarters are at an address in North London, near Hampstead Heath. From here the stores are distributed over the length and breadth of the country.

“ ‘ It will be my endeavour, on returning to England, to probe the mystery of the Summer Hotel, the house on the headland, for I feel certain that it has a story to tell. This will be the final step in my investigation, but I feel that, even if I fail, and if I have done wrong in concealing my movements, here, at

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least, is a full explanation of the results, and the means employed whereby I came to them.

“ ‘ My only true regret in the case is the fear that my prolonged absence may have caused undue anxiety to my darling daughter Anne, but I will close by begging her to remember that all I have attempted was in the hope of repressing vice, and its corresponding torment, in the lives of the countrymen and women of my beloved England.

“ ‘ Written on board the S.S. *Orlando*.

“ ‘ Homeward bound from Norway,

“ ‘ 15th September, 1925.

“ ‘ JOHN DENBIGH.’ ”

CHAPTER XXXIV

A LONG silence followed the termination of the reading of the manuscript.

Mr. Smith presently looked up, and then quickly averted his gaze, for his glance had been at Anne, and he had immediately seen that her eyes were a mist of tears.

Carstairs, who had been sitting rather uncomfortably on the extreme edge of his chair, eventually rose, and, having nodded a silent farewell to the others, put his arm about Anne and led her gently out into the radiant winter sunlight.

Blake followed them at a discreet distance, and presently saw the two turn into the wide doorway of a popular City restaurant ; then, feeling that his day's work was yet incomplete, and that his charge over the girl was rapidly drawing to a close, he hailed a passing taxi, and was soon being whirled swiftly to the westward.

Twysden had remained behind in Mr. Smith's office, and, when the others had gone, settled back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

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Finally he turned to the other.

"You were asking me about Anne," he said, "but I don't see that I can tell you very much of her history, unless I go back over the old ground and explain something of her father.

"Mr. Denbigh, in the first place, as you must have gathered, was a singularly secretive man, though in many ways I can hardly find it in me to blame him."

"You mean, you think that he was 'all in' for the honour and glory for himself?"

Twysden nodded.

"Yes, that is so. At the time when he 'disappeared,' we at the Yard knew extraordinarily little about his movements, and never heard anything about his death, which must have taken place a comparatively short time ago, until his body was actually found by Blake and Carstairs. He was shot from one of the upper windows of the house on the headland—Blake found the weapon before we left. It was a large-bore, high-velocity gun, with a silencer. Obviously they had had suspicions of him for some time, and waited their opportunity when he was spying round the place."

He paused.

"When Denbigh had been missing for over

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two months we began to get anxious, and it was then we discovered that his daughter, and this man Blake, were hunting for him. The girl knew remarkably little of her father's plans, but sufficient to put her on the track of Neile, from whom she discovered the existence of Grove House, that address in Hampstead I was telling you about. She spied on the house one night, and discovered enough to put her definitely on the track of the Brenport dépôt."

"One moment," interrupted Smith. "I gathered that they had been down there before."

Twysden nodded again.

"That is true," he admitted; "but the particular significance of the place cannot have struck them until then. I had actually visited the place fairly constantly, but, like Denbigh, my primary energies were centred at sea, and around the black ship, rather than on the mystery on shore.

"But it was the subject of Anne which brought this topic up. I told you that she had been spying on the gang in Hampstead. Well, one night she was seen at the window, and again while escaping across the garden. As she was still insistent about carrying on her search for her father, which necessitated continued contact with the Stein gang, Blake,

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who had assumed the position of guardian besides his private detective duties, recommended a disguise—the unique one of a club foot. The transformation was naturally amazing, and enough to throw suspicion off her from the very first time that she wore it.

“ But now, referring back to the case as a whole, I must confess that it does not strike me as being so very singular that Denbigh did not confide in Blake to a greater extent at the beginning. Naturally enough, I don't think Denbigh imagined that he would fail, but he had the vague consolation, of course, that, if he did, the other would receive all the necessary information from the document which he had left personally in your hands.”

Smith nodded slowly.

“ You're right,” he said presently, “ and I must confess that between you, you and Blake, you've made me see daylight.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then continued :

“ Blake was telling me that Anne—Miss Denbigh—had sworn an oath to kill the leader of her father's murderers with her own hands. And now, in a way, I rather regret that that arch-scoundrel Stein cheated her of her vow.”

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Twysden, who had been gazing out of the window with a strange expression on his usually impassive countenance, inclined his head slowly.

“ Yes,” he agreed, in a low voice.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE night express for Plymouth had already drawn into Platform No. 1 at the great Paddington terminus, and was waiting impatiently for the passengers to get aboard before it pulled out and began its swift rush south and to the westward.

Two figures paced restlessly to and fro, and came to a halt presently beside the Jagger War Memorial. They paused for a moment, and after a while moved uncertainly on. It was the girl who was the first to break the silence.

“ You will take care of yourself, darling ? ”

Carstairs looked down into her upturned face.

“ Why, of course,” he said. Then he coughed irritably ; it was strange that there should be this queer lump in his throat this evening.

He tore his glance away, and looked swiftly towards the lighted compartments of the waiting train. He felt a growing necessity of finding a new topic of conversation, and finally said : “ You remember the first time

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we met? In Danny's cottage? Was it Twysden you were expecting to see?"

The girl nodded quickly.

"Yes. We knew that he was on the road somewhere close.

"I was motoring down with Mr. Blake, and when we saw your car waiting outside I felt sure it was his. We particularly wanted to see him, and it was a shock to find someone quite different. Do you see?"

"Why, of course. Was it so very unpleasant?"

She squeezed his arm.

"Of course not, you silly boy."

A porter came bustling down the platform closing carriage doors. Some distance away the guard was restlessly handling the green lantern.

Carstairs stepped through an open doorway, closed it, and then stood looking out.

Anne let her hand rest on the window-frame, and he grasped her fingers tightly in his.

Again he cleared his throat, and leant far out over the carriage step and kissed her.

"Anne, I'm coming up to see you some time around Christmas. I'll manage it even if it means court martial. There's something—something rather important I want

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to ask you." He looked uneasily into the starry grey eyes. "Don't forget me."

She laughed—a happy little laugh—a laugh which, nevertheless, concealed a wistful sob. Then she flung back her head bravely and returned his anxious gaze.

"Good-bye, dear," she said, "until then."

There came a sudden flash of a green lamp, a whistle, and the train glided out.

Carstairs leant forward and watched the slim form of the receding figure—watched her until she was out of sight.

THE END

